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My Turn: Health care is a human right

By Laurie Larson

In the United States., health care is a privilege for the wealthy few instead of a right guaranteed to all.

Health care related debt is the leading cause of personal bankruptcy. My own parents lost the legacy they intended to leave for my siblings and me due to medical debt. Most doctors would agree that stress is the number one exacerbating cause of illness of all kinds, and nothing ratchets up stress like debt, poverty and health care insecurity. Chronic illness costs businesses more than \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 was finally signed by the United States in 1979; it has yet to be ratified by the U.S. Senate. This covenant recognizes the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest standard of physical and mental health. It mandates signatory states to protect this right by ensuring that everyone in their jurisdiction has access to a comprehensive system of health care, which is available to everyone without discrimination, and economically accessible to all.

The United States seems to be the last developed country on the planet to ascribe to this philosophy, showing us to be seriously out of step with current world thinking. While spending per capita more than twice that of the average industrialized nation, American life expectancy ranks 30th in the world.

The August 2008 Census Bureau report on income, poverty and health insurance coverage in the United States for 2007 shows that 27.8 percent of the population already has nationalized health insurance through such programs as Medicare, Medicaid, SCHIP and TRICARE. It is not such a big leap to legislation granting similar coverage for the benefit of all. Our taxes already pay for health care benefits for teachers, police, state workers and other civil servants. Expecting employers to insure the rest of us puts them in a position of dealing with an exponentially expanding business expense. How "pro-business" is this? This same report shows that even so, 8 million children in our country still have no insurance. The Commonwealth Fund's 2008 report showed that in 2007, 42 percent of all working age adults were either uninsured or underinsured, up from 35 percent in 2003. The United States places last among 19 industrialized nations in improvements made that prevent premature deaths that could have been avoided with timely access to effective health care.

As a health care advocate at the Office of Health Care Ombudsman, I hear from many people who do not qualify for state benefits who also cannot afford to purchase health insurance, as well as people who have health insurance but are denied essential care by their insurers.

As a lecturer at the University of Vermont, I read several dozen papers annually from students' interviews of both allopathic and alternative medicine practitioners who complain that they must spend increasing amounts of time dealing with paperwork, advocating for their patients to get the care they need and justifying to insurance companies the medical necessity of the care that they prescribe.

The current system is designed to make profits for insurance company stockholders, and to provide big bonuses for their executives, while also enriching the pharmaceutical corporations, the top ten of

which hold the top ten places in the Fortune 500 and make more profits combined than the other 490 put together.

The costs of the current system are spiraling out of control. Personally I believe, along with many others, that the efficiencies and non-discriminatory accessibility that a universal, single payer health care system would provide are desperately needed immediately. Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.

Laurie Larson of Burlington works at the Vermont Healthcare Ombudsman Office as a lecturer at the University of Vermont and is a member of the Healthcare Is A Human Right Campaign coordinated by the Vermont Workers' Center.

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