

Universal Access to Health Care - Testimony for Campaign for a National Program Now

Testimony for Campaign for a National Program Now (CNHPNow!)

Public/Congressional Hearing

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Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of him [or her] self and of his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” The right to health care is also guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man. It is included in a number of national constitutions and the European Union Charter. Countries around the world have embraced national policies that define the goal of health care to be public health and social well being. Every other industrialized country, and even South Africa, has adopted a health care plan ensuring access for all.

Our country has the money and resources to guarantee universal access to health care. Indeed, the U.S. already spends more on health related expenses than any other country in the world. Non-medical expenses, such as marketing, advertising and administration play a major role in driving the high cost of health care in the U.S. Billions are spent advertising prescription drugs, while many of the people who see the ads can't afford any health insurance. The primacy of profit motives diverts resources from cost effective preventative care towards expensive and risky interventions once people are already very sick.

What difference would it make if our political leaders on both the national and local level recognized and fulfilled their obligation to protect the human right to health care?

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First, rejecting the notion that health care is a privilege or a temporary entitlement, but rather a right requires accountability towards the public, and a health care policy with universal access to adequate health care as an intrinsic goal. In other words, human rights defines health care not as something portioned out based on pre-conditions such as ability to pay, or eligibility for particular programs, but as a basic resource for life to be provided to each and every one of us.

The human right to health care does not require that the government be the health care provider or administrator of health services. The private sector could be part of and profit from a health insurance system that meets human rights standards. However, human rights do place specific obligations on the government to ensure that the privatization of health services and profit-making do not compromise or threaten the accessibility, availability, acceptability or adequacy of health care. These basic standards for corporate accountability do not exist in the system that the U.S. has today.

Human rights standards are the product of a deliberate process creating a universal understanding of what every country of the world should provide to its people in order to give them a chance for survival and a life with dignity. They are the result of the common global vision to ensure freedom, prevent violence and provide indivisible standards to protect human life.

This vision is universal, meaning that it includes all people. Therefore, our ability to claim and demand human rights cannot be dependent on our government's willingness to formally recognize them. The U.S. government persists in taking a position that the right to health care is "aspirational," or an idealistic and unachievable goal, with no practical obligations on government. But common practice and experience demonstrate that this is not the case. Guaranteeing the right to health care is realizable and achievable.

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It is our government's refusal to recognize this right that puts access to care in a constant state of uncertainty. If government policy were formulated to meet these moral and legal norms, we would have a healthier population and more just society. Instead, right now, in the midst of an already prevalent health care crisis, Medicaid, the country's largest health insurance system is under attack. This threatens the over 50 million low income people, half of whom are children, who rely on the program with becoming the latest victims of violations of the human right to health.

We must abandon the idea of health care, a basic human right, as a commodity available only to those who can afford it. Human rights are universal, indivisible and should be part of every person's experience living in the United States. Other rights necessary for survival, such as water, are currently being commodified. We desperately need to reverse this trend before it extends to every element of life. We must ensure that our communities can claim their human right to health and hold their political representatives to its standards as they craft public policy.

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