

ANJA RUDIGER

## Presidential Candidates Are Not Serious About Protecting Our Health

As the primary season is heating up, the leading contenders get increasingly anxious to distinguish themselves from each other. During [Monday's Democratic debate](#) the playground bickering over whose health care plan covers more people had some embarrassing "yes I do" - "no you don't" - "yes I do" moments. If that did little to help distinguish their positions, that's also because their plans are not, in fact, that different. At least it seems all Democrats are now in favor of universal access to health insurance.

And even Republican candidates realize they need to do better than the Bush administration in securing our access to health care. Perhaps they have been prompted into action by an estimated 101,000 preventable deaths per year, which are attributed to shortcomings in the way health care is organized in the United States. As future president, any of the candidates would be obligated, according to human rights standards, to protect our health.

Does that mean we can start this election year with the optimistic outlook that the new president will take his or her obligation seriously? Not exactly. Among the field of candidates, only Kucinich has recognized that we have a right to health care. What about the other Democrats? I asked Edwards' campaign during a phone debriefing whether he recognizes the right to health care. It turned out that it hadn't yet occurred to the Edwards camp that we, the people, could be entitled to the pursuit of healthy lives. So there's an opportunity: let's tell our candidates they should stop treating us as consumers who can choose to buy or to forgo health care. When we're sick, we don't have a choice. But we do have the right to receive the treatment we need.

The purpose of a health care system is the protection of health, not financial gains for investors and shareholders. Let's take it from [British Prime Minister Brown](#) who confirmed on the first working day of 2008 that "the way to healthcare [is] not as a privilege to be paid for but as a fundamental human right."

That's not what Democrats are proposing. They call for a multi-payer, mixed public-private system with the goal of universal insurance coverage. But why is their repeated insistence on universal coverage not to be applauded? Because their rivalry about whose plan is more "universal" amounts to nothing more than a contest over who will create more consumers to purchase health care as a product. To achieve this, candidates from both parties offer tax subsidies for buying insurance, thus pouring yet more resources into the private insurance market, without ensuring these will primarily be spent on health protection, rather than on profits and administrative costs.

A [new human rights assessment](#), carried out by the [National Economic and Social Rights Initiative](#) and the [National Health Law Program](#), concludes that none of the leading candidates have put forward health care plans that meet human rights standards. On the contrary, it finds that Democrats and Republicans alike fail to offer workable solutions for reforming the health care system in a way that would ensure equitable access to comprehensive health care for everyone - a core requirement of the human right to health care.

That is not to say Republicans wouldn't be capable of making things a lot worse, in particular by deregulating the insurance market and prompting more employers to drop coverage. The human rights impact of Republican plans could be disastrous, accelerating the number of people rejected by private insurers and selling bare-bones coverage to the rest of middle America. But Democratic challengers need to step up to their human rights obligation: their reform plans for health care financing must be revised in order to put people over profits. Health care is about attending to those with health needs, rather than rewarding the healthy and serving the wealthy. Let's demand nothing less as we cast our votes this year.

Anja Rudiger: [Author Bio](#) | [Other Posts](#)  
Posted at 7:04 AM, Jan 23, 2008 in [Health Care](#)  
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## Comments

According to Joe Klein, Bob Shrum has been inserting phrases like, "Health care is a right, not a privilege" into the speeches of any Democrat he could. That he's yet to win a single Presidential election suggests that maybe the current Democratic strategy of talking in terms of costs isn't so bad an idea.

Posted by: [Alon Levy](#) | [January 23, 2008 2:19 PM](#)

Human rights, if taken with the seriousness they deserve, are about far more than rhetoric or slogans. In fact, it is far more important that a policymaker or candidate promote and implement substantive protections that comply with human rights standards than insert phrases into speeches that "health care is a human right" -- the core principals are simple but important, health care must be universal and equitably afforded, the system must be accountable and participatory -- private actors such as insurers must be regulated so that they don't undermine access to care -- implementation of these principles would be to the benefit of the vast majority of people -- and indeed, polls reflect that most people (over 2/3) support them. Supporting principled reform, grounded in human rights concepts, should not be in the least a barrier to "electability" were real leadership to emerge.

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Posted by: [cathy albisa](#) | January 23, 2008 3:34 PM

*Supporting principled reform, grounded in human rights concepts, should not be in the least a barrier to "electability" were real leadership to emerge.*

Wars shouldn't happen, and China should stop censoring everything. But in the real world wars happen, China engages in censorship, and Democrats who can't argue for universal health care in economic terms don't win elections.

Posted by: [Alon Levy](#) | January 23, 2008 8:51 PM

In fact in economic terms it would be a far more cost efficient to run a health care system according to basic human rights principles than the current approach -- we spend more to get less - that is common knowledge. In fact an honest economic conversation is exactly what we need.

Posted by: [cathy albisa](#) | January 24, 2008 4:07 PM

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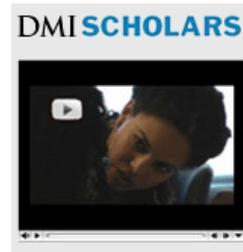
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