

Healthcare: Professionalism versus profit

Many Americans think that the U.S. healthcare system is the best in the world. That opinion can be disputed because despite being the most expensive healthcare system in the world, the U.S. ranks below the 20th position compared to other countries in regards to longevity and infant mortality. Americans are getting jipped. How can the wealthiest nation in the world be so off track?

The practice of medicine is unsuited to be controlled by business principles and should be conducted as a profession. Most physicians, nurses, and other medical professionals have a belief system that assigns a higher priority to doing useful and needed work than to economic rewards. This ideology also focuses more on the quality and social benefits of work rather than its profitability.

Despite the inappropriateness of using a business model, the practice of medicine has become commercialized. Rather than the healthcare system existing for people, people have become revenue sources for the healthcare system. The commercialization of medicine has challenged the commitment of physicians to put the needs of patients ahead of personal gain, to deal with patients honestly, competently, and compassionately, and to avoid conflicts of interest. Healthcare has become a \$2 trillion industry (16% of the Gross Domestic Product), largely influenced by the growth of private investor-owned businesses with a primary concern to maximize profits. In no other country are the organizations that provide medical care so driven by income and profit generation. Even nonprofit medical institutions act like their for-profit counterparts.

Friction arises when medical professionals deal with medical institutions run by business principles without regard to what is best for the people they serve. Medical care of people is about collaboration not competition. Business models may financially benefit bankers, builders, and advertisers, but may not benefit patients in ways that provide good health outcomes. Profits are generated because of illness, not wellness. Advertisement is much more prevalent. As Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) has put it "Advertising may be described as the science of arresting human intelligence long enough to get money from it."

There is a belief in this country that a more technological approach to medicine is better than a less technological approach, even though, there is no proof to support this notion. The growth of technology and sub-specialization is attracting more medical students into specialties and away from primary care. The greater economic rewards of procedural specialties

are particularly appealing to physicians who enter practice burdened with large school loans. If a medical student chooses a career in primary care, they are giving up much more than \$2-3 million dollars in potential income over their career.

The number of primary care physicians has dwindled, especially in the area of general internal medicine. General internal medicine physicians (internists) manage patients with complex and chronic illness. Chronic illness is responsible for 80% of healthcare costs. To read more about the state of general internal medicine, please visit the website www.mtinternist.org. Without primary care, people receive more fragmented care, often in settings that are much more expensive than a medical office. Fragmented care results in worse health outcomes.

Currently many primary care physicians are employed by hospitals (an expanding trend in Montana), which by design is a conflict of interest. With well practiced primary care, healthcare costs will drop by reducing hospitalizations, emergency room visits, diagnostic tests, and procedures. This then reduces hospital revenues. If a pure business model is followed, it is financially beneficial for the hospital to put employed primary care physicians in environments so that good primary care can not be accomplished.

People deserve medical professionalism above profits. They deserve better outcomes for what they are paying.

To discuss this further, please join me at the large meeting room at the Lewis and Clark library Monday, July 25th from 7 pm to 8:30 pm.