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Herb Rothschild Jr.: Support single-payer

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and of the enactment of Medicare. Not long ago, a U.S. Supreme Court dominated by Republican appointees gutted the Voting Rights Act, and a Democratic president who never could have been elected without it took Medicare for Everyone off the table when he proposed his much ballyhooed health reform.

The American Medical Association tried to defeat Medicare. It cleverly labeled all such proposals “socialized medicine.” Medicare isn’t socialized medicine. The VA health care system is socialized medicine. Its hospitals are publicly owned, and VA staff are salaried employees paid with tax dollars. Medicare is only an insurance program.

So Medicare didn’t threaten the livelihood of physicians. Instead, it added huge numbers of paying clients to their patient base. The AMA had identified the wrong threat. The real threat emerged in the 1980s. It was the private insurance industry, not public insurance, that drastically interfered with the practice of medicine.

Private insurance plans forced most physicians to join groups like health maintenance organizations, hospital systems, and other large groupings — some of them corporations interested in profits, not health care. Often physicians couldn’t treat their patients without approval for payment from the patients’ insurance carriers, whose on-staff medical personnel could second-guess the attending physician. In more subtle but ever-present ways, the imposition of a corporate model has distorted the practice of medicine and diminished the satisfaction of practitioners.

So today, a majority of physicians and an even larger majority of other health care workers favor a system of universal publicly-funded health insurance, i.e. Medicare for Everyone. Why? Because private insurers add nothing of value to the practice of medicine. Yet they interfere. And they drain away about 25 cents of every health care dollar in the form of corporate profits and the costs of a complex system of claims. Physicians for a National Health Care Plan estimates that, without private insurers, the annual savings from reduced paperwork alone would be at least \$400 billion, enough to provide comprehensive coverage to everyone without paying more than we do now.

The U.S. government makes no profit from Medicare, and its administrative overhead is about 2 percent. And the level of customer satisfaction with Medicare is much higher than the level of satisfaction with private insurers.

So why did President Obama, who as a candidate said he preferred a single-payer system of public insurance, not even consider it, but instead allowed the private insurance industry to retain its dominating and profitable role? The result has been an even more complex system with little chance of cost control. And why did Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., the key Congressional player in 2009, not allow single-payer advocates into his three preliminary hearings (they crashed the third and were dragged out)?

Why? Money, money, money. Campaign contributions from the private insurers and from Big Pharma. Baucus' 2008 Federal Election Commission filings are Exhibit A for the sale of the public interest.

Washington will not give us Medicare for Everyone. Salem may. A statewide effort by Health Care for All Oregon is going strong. Rogue Valley supporters will join others for HCAO's lobby day in Salem on Wednesday, Feb. 11. Consider riding the chartered bus that day. Buy tickets at <http://peacehouse.net/buses-to-lobby-in-salem-for-single-payer-health/>. And go to <http://peacehouse.net> for information on the "Be a Player for Single Payer" fundraiser at Paschal Winery on Jan. 27.

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