

The American Medical System is Nearing Collapse

By Tommy G. Thompson

We are living in the most amazing era of medicine in human history. Yet as we all know too well, all is not well with American medicine. In point of fact, we are dealing with a system of healthcare delivery that is, at its root, dysfunctional.

The problem - the crisis - is the system by which care is delivered, which has simply not matured at the same pace as the technologies and treatments now available.

I've traveled all over the country. I've traveled to Spain and Germany. I've been to Canada. I've discussed healthcare with some of the leading policymakers and caregivers in the world. And sadly, I have to report that in Western society broadly, the various systems of care are eroding with ever-greater rapidity.

I've come to one central conclusion: The way we provide care is in jeopardy of collapse. It is clouded by regulatory burdens that are confusing, duplicative and extremely time-consuming. Physicians and nurses almost have to obtain advanced degrees in business administration, accounting and jurisprudence just to run their offices from day to day. Patients have to fill out endless forms; get transferred from place to place; worry about what insurance will pay for what treatment and at what cost.

We have to fundamentally change the current healthcare delivery system in our country. The myriad rules, regulations and restrictions that make obtaining good healthcare difficult, if not impossible, have to be reviewed carefully and, when necessary, jettisoned like useless ballast.

But there's another area of reform that must - I repeat, must - be among the highest priorities we can develop: malpractice reform. America is experiencing a medical malpractice insurance coverage crisis that is increasing the cost of healthcare, decreasing access to doctors and hospitals for many patients and lowering the overall quality of care provided to patients.

Tommy G. Thompson is U.S. secretary of health and human services. This is excerpted and condensed from his remarks July 18 in Chicago to the American Medical Association

I believe Nick Regush [summarized the problem](#) quite nicely earlier this year:

"There is no way to be nice about this. There is no point in raising false hopes. There is no treatment or vaccine in sight. There is no miracle breakthrough on the horizon.

Medicine, as we know it, is dying. It is entering a terminal phase.

What began as an acute illness reached the chronic stage about a decade ago and its progression towards death has been remarkably swift and well beyond anything anyone could have predicted.

The disease is caused by conflict of interest, tainted research, greed for big bucks, pretentious doctors and scientists, lying, cheating, invasion by the morally bankrupt marketing automatons of the drug industry, derelict politicians and federal and state regulators - all seasoned with huge doses of self-importance and foul odor."

As the article above documents, and as many of us have predicted, the traditional system is ready to collapse.

I do not share this to be the purveyor of bad news, but to announce that a new day is dawning. As many of you are already aware, the drugs and surgery the existing medical establishment has foisted on you are not the solution to better health, but merely their methods of making more money off of you by treating only diseases - diseases their paradigm helped to foster in the first place. Consider that:

Retail pharmacies filled 3 billion prescriptions in the U.S. in 2000.

We are currently spending 1.4 trillion dollars for healthcare in the US, or 14% of our current overall budget. That is projected to double in the next 8 years to [3 trillion dollars](#), a staggering 17% of our total national output.

Folks, those are figures in trillions, not billions. Three trillion dollars is 3,000 billion dollars.

"The consequences of this shift of resources will be enormous for companies, workers and the government. It will mean a massive transfer of the nation's income, including profits, wages and tax dollars, to disease-oriented traditional medical care.

"Employees will face an increasingly stark situation: the more money they receive in on-the-job benefits, the less they'll receive in wages, pensions, or vacation time."

- From Business Week August 26, 2002 p 144.

The sad tragedy is that we are spending all of this money on disease management focused on drugs and surgery and our return on this investment is profoundly poor.

Business Week further comments:

"Perhaps one-third of all medical spending - some \$600 billion dollars - may be unnecessary, out-of-date, or even dangerous treatments."

The recent articles below, each of which discusses \$3 billion dollar wastes of your money, evidence this.

We are not achieving the high levels of health that we could be. Increasing amounts of people do not have the energy they need to get through the day, while millions of others are suffering with painful crippling diseases because they have violated basic health principles.

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