

Editorial

Can Health Be Maintained, Or Just Restored?

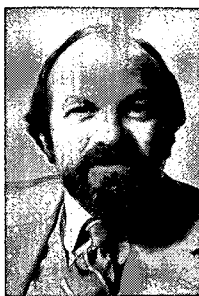
President Carter, perhaps in an attempt to boost his sagging popularity, has come out again in support of HMO's and Federal seed money is being appropriated to help their establishment. The idea and the name, Health Maintenance Organizations, were designated for popular appeal. Favored by politicians and by some physicians who have become weary of private practice, the falacious nature of the assumptions that underlie the HMO concept deserves to be clearly understood. If the integrity of those who favor HMO's is not to be questioned, then confusion about the real facts must be assumed. When the HMO idea is understood, it simply cannot be rationally supported.

Health is not a commodity, like bread, that people desire a fixed amount of. It is a state of relative being. Something is usually wrong with anyone at any time, for the body is an incomprehensibly complex chemical, anatomical and physiologic super-structure of inter-related and inter-dependent processes striving for homeostasis. Physically and emotionally people change from minute to minute, and they

seek the attention of physicians most commonly for no other reason than to be assured that nothing is seriously wrong, in spite of temporary states of discomfort. Since some insecurity and anxiety are universal and omnipresent, the reassurance of physicians is sought to the full extent that it is available. Free bread will be consumed somewhat more than bread that is paid for, but only up to a point. Free medical attention and advice, on the other hand, is always consumed in ever greater quantities, because it brings temporary solace for the anxieties of living. Medicine, obviously, treats more than just the usual syndromes that are classified as medical or surgical entities.

There are no acceptable alternatives to health, yet it is never fully achieved. Efforts are constantly required to restore homeostatic harmony, which is subjectively experienced as health. Even when they had to pay for it, patients turned to their physicians with minor complaints, looking to him to minimize their pain and restore their functioning, but mostly because of loneliness and fear. In pre-paid systems such as HMO's, demands on physicians' services always increase dramatically, the greater availability stimulating the demand. Three options are then left to society:

1. Increase expenditures for medical care, without any upper limit, to meet the new demand. This, obviously, is not feasible, so this option is never exercised.
2. Since limited resources limit the supply, decide to spend less time with each patient. Efficiency measures will be introduced to speed patients through, thus making medical care more mechanistic and less humane. Quality is markedly lowered, the patient becomes a statistic.



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3. Allow physicians paid by such a system to continue treating a relatively small number of patients properly. All others will wait weeks, months and sometimes years to obtain anything more than first-aid.

Since all three alternatives are unacceptable, such unpleasant facts are ignored altogether. As long as only relatively few patients enroll in HMO's the public coffers can subsidize them heavily while the Carters and the Kennedys continue to make false promises to a gullible electorate. And, we "après nous le déluge."

Physicians, being human and being imperfect, are also subject to all the temptations which lure others. When they are paid by the piece in a system known as fee-for-service, they are likely to work harder and do better than when their salary checks are fixed and guaranteed. The productivity of factory workers and of physicians, too, always falls when the incentive to produce is taken away. This lesson has reluctantly been learned by the Soviet Union and even by China, both of whom restored some features of the free-enterprise system to fight apathy and to improve sagging productivity.

But, the day-dreamers among us, substituting wishful-thinking for reality, seem to have learned nothing from such observations. Their delusional zeal threatens a system that is far from perfect, but which works.

Footnote:

A Bill sponsored by Senators Schweiker and Kennedy proposing expanded Federal aid to promote and extend the HMO concept is now awaiting action by the Senate. It would provide for managerial assistance to new health maintenance groups and more money for planning grants, operating subsidies and construction loan guarantees, all with the strange reasoning that HMO's can reduce overall medical costs by ten to forty percent and the cost of hospitalization and physician visits even more.

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