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I Am A Republican ... Can We Talk About A Single Payer System?

By David May, M.D.

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I am a Republican. For those who know me that is not a surprise. I live in a red state. I have never voted for a Democratic presidential candidate. I can field strip, clean and reassemble a Remington 12-gauge pump blindfolded. And on top of it, I think we should talk about having a single payer national health care plan. The reason is quite simple. In my view, we already have one; we just don't take advantage of it.

Firstly, Medicare and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) are de facto setting all of the rules now. They are a single payer system. When we go to lobby the Hill, we lobby Congress and CMS. Talking to Blue Cross, Aetna, Cigna and United Health care is essentially a waste of time. All the third party payers do is play off the Medicare rules to their advantage and profit. They have higher premiums, pay a somewhat higher benefit and have a significantly higher level of regulation which impedes the care of their customers. This is no longer consumer choice but effectively extortion, a less than hidden shake down in which the "choice" for a family of four is company A at \$900 per month or company B at \$1100 per month. The payers are simply taking advantage of the system, playing both ends against the middle.

Secondly, in order to move forward with true health care finance we need complete transparency in cost and expense ... and we need it now. As was noted in a recent Time magazine piece on the hidden cost of health care, our current system is a vulgar, less than honorable construct more akin to used car sales than medical care, cloaked under the guise of generally accepted accounting principles and hospital cost shifting.

Thirdly, with a single payer system would potentially come real utilization data, real quality metrics and real accountability. The promise of ICD-10 with all of its difficulties is that of a much more granular claims-made data. We could use some granularity in health care data and we will never achieve it in big data quantities without a single payer system.

Lastly, I think that the physicians should be in charge of health care and not the insurance companies and hospital systems. With a single price structure, it becomes all about medical decision making, efficiency, the provision of care to our patients, and shared decision making, all of which we do well.

How, you might say, could a Republican come to such a position? The simple answer is I really think it is quite Republican. Oh, I know there will be many raised eyebrows and many critics. I accept that. I understand the fact that no single payer system is perfect, that it is “socialist,” that it is “un-American.”

I would submit to you, however, that it is un-American to allow many of our citizens to be uninsured, that it is un-American to shunt money away from a strong military in order to support a bloated, inefficient and fraud-laden health care system, that it is un-American not to be open and above board with the cost of what we do, the expense of that service and the profit that we make. Mostly, it is un-American to let this outrageous health care injustice continue.

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