

There's no such thing as 'free' health care

There is no right to health care. I don't think saying that makes me a jerk. I don't think that makes me greedy, selfish or lacking in compassion. I think it just makes me honest.

I don't mean to get all philosophical, even though working with ideas is an important part of my job. But when you watch what the Colorado Legislature is doing, particularly under Democratic control, thinking about ideas becomes really important. Even if it's not currently fashionable.

Senate Democrats want to help some people by hurting others. No surprise there; that's what Democrats do. In Senate Bill 19, they want to hurt drivers who don't want medical coverage on their car insurance. Democrats want to help those who need emergency medical care but can't get people to provide it for them. This is typical Democratic thinking, if you can call it that.

If we know anything about how politics works outside of a high school civics class, we know that the costs of a law will be borne by others besides the intended losers, just as the benefits will accrue to people who aren't the intended winners.

None of that is news any more. But I can't help wondering if people think SB-19 is a good idea anyway, simply because they believe in a right to health care.

The particulars of belief vary from person to person. Some people think everyone has a right to equal medical care. Others believe people who can afford better health care are welcome to it, as long as they're forced to provide a "safety net" for those who can't.

The first view is socialized medicine. In light of the catastrophic failure of centralized planning, nobody takes that seriously any more. The safety net idea, however, is very appealing. If I could wave a magic wand and create a system that would provide some minimum standard for society's poorest, who need medical care for reasons not of their own making, who were unemployed through no fault of their own and who had exhausted every other available resource, I would do it.

But I can't. No one can. No society ever has. And no society ever will.

We know from experience that transfer-



OPINION

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ring wealth from some people to others never works the way it's supposed to. It doesn't create wealth, it doesn't create jobs and it doesn't come without a price. Nor do entitlements stay focused on the poor. Without a civic culture of self-reliance, virtue and individual responsibility as a countervailing force, entitlements grow like a cancer.

So even if in theory we want a safety net, in practice we don't get it. We can't. Defenders of health care as a "right" know this. Instead, they say things like "Sure, the system isn't perfect, but if we didn't have something like it things would be a lot worse."

But are we sure that's true? If we lived in a culture of responsibility, one in which it was understood there was no right to health care, what exactly would happen?

What if medical care got cheaper and better every year, like things we don't have a right to? What if people took more responsibility for their own health? What if all the money used to prop up a bloated, inefficient system were returned to the citizens from whence it came? Those all seem like pretty good questions to me. They're at least worth thinking about.

Others will say we have a right to health care because without it the social tensions would tear America apart. Anyone elected on the promise of rolling back the welfare state would face rioting in the streets. Wealth redistribution is necessary to keep the peace. To which I'd reply "And whose fault is that?"

All of us are descended from people who didn't believe in a right to health care. But live long enough under an entitlement regime, and the ethic of individual responsibility starts to die.

Entitlement programs create their own constituency, to the point where those who support them think they can safely say "Sorry, there's nothing we can do about them now."

Hogwash. Restoring the culture of individual responsibility will be difficult, but not impossible. The question is only whether or not it's the right thing to do. Killing SB-19 would be a good start.

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