'Sicko' health care reform

by Michael Tanner

I recently saw a sneak preview of Michael Moore's new movie "Sicko," and I can tell you honestly that the movie is both funny and poignant.

Some of the stories Moore tells of Americans who have been caught up in the bureaucracy of the American health system are truly heart-wrenching. The insurance company bureaucrats he exposes are cruel and capricious.

There is no doubt that Michael Moore is a skilled filmmaker and an effective propagandist, but serious advocates of health care reform would be advised against relying too heavily on his view.

Moore ignores the positive side of American health care altogether. For all its problems, the United States still provides the highest quality health care in the world.

Eighteen of the last 25 winners of the Nobel Prize in medicine either are U.S. citizens or work here. With no price controls, free-market U.S. medicine provides the incentives that lead to innovation breakthroughs in new drugs and other medical technologies.

U.S. companies have developed half of all the major new medicines introduced worldwide over the past 20 years, and Americans played a key role in 80 percent of the most important medical advances of the past 30 years, according to a survey by the president's Council of Economic Advisors.

When you are sick, the United States is the place to be.

Comparing the outcome for specific diseases like cancer or heart disease, the United States clearly outperforms the rest of the world. Take prostate cancer, for example. American men are more likely to be diagnosed with prostate cancer than men in other countries, but we're less likely to die of it.

Fewer than one in five American men with prostate cancer will die from it, while a quarter of Canadian men will, and even more ominously, 57 percent of British men and nearly half of French and German men will.

Similar results can be found for other cancers, AIDS and heart disease. When former Italian Prime Minister

Silvio Berlusconi needed heart surgery last year, he didn't go to France, Canada, Cuba or even an Italian hospital - he went to the Cleveland Clinic.

Moore points out that too many Americans lack health insurance, but ignores the fact that most are uninsured for only brief periods of time. Nor does he mention that nearly 10 million of the 47 million uninsured Americans are actually eligible for Medicaid, but fail to apply.

Moore highlights the stories of several Americans who were denied reimbursement for experimental treatments. Some of the results are tragic. But does he really believe national health care systems would cover such treatments?

Indeed, Moore generally overlooks the flaws of national health care systems. For instance, he downplays waiting lists in Canada, suggesting they are no more than inconveniences. He interviews apparently healthy Canadians who claim they have no problem getting care. He even follows an uninsured American who slips across the border from Detroit to visit a free Canadian clinic.

Yet somehow, Moore couldn't find any of the nearly 800,000 Canadians who are currently on the waiting list for treatment. Nor apparently did he have time to interview Canadian Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin, who wrote in a 2005 decision striking down part of Canada's universal care law that many Canadians waiting for treatment suffer chronic pain and "patients die while on the waiting list."

Similarly, in a truly funny sequence, Moore struggles to find the payment window at a British hospital. It might not have been so funny if he had talked to any of the 850,000 Britons waiting for admission to those hospitals.

Every year, shortages force Britain's National Health Service to cancel as many as 50,000 operations. Roughly 40 percent of cancer patients never get to see an oncology specialist. Delays in receiving treatment are often so long that nearly 20 percent of colon cancer cases considered treatable when first diagnosed are incurable by the time treatment is finally offered.

The American health care system clearly needs reform. But it would be a shame if Moore's latest piece of propaganda stampedes Americans into sacrificing the quality, choice and freedom that our health care system provides today.

Michael Tanner is director of health and welfare studies at the Cato Institute.

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