



Socialized Medicine: Polemic or Panacea?

[By Akbar Ali]

The concept and practice of socialized medicine have been matters of considerable difficulty for many Americans since the first serious attempt at national health coverage failed in the early 1990s. Opponents of universal and federally funded healthcare coined the term “socialized medicine” back in the 1920s as a pejorative which evokes socialism and government control, two ideas that are anathema to the entrenched American ideals of free market capitalism and individual choice.

But is the argument *fair*? Or even relevant? Many Americans would be surprised to learn that socialized medicine has been around since the end of the 19th century — and it exists in certain quarters of American life in more ways than are generally acknowledged.

The current presidential campaign has certainly raised the issue beyond the expected promises for universal healthcare, an initiative supported by the majority of Americans — a recent ABC News/Washington Post poll found that by a two-to-one margin, Americans are in favor of a universal health insurance program *on the condition* that it does not limit the individual right to choose doctors or lead to waiting lists for non-emergency treatments.

The first modern program of socialized medicine was established in Germany as “compulsory national health insurance” by German Chancellor Prince Otto von Bismarck in 1884. Because the cost of mandatory healthcare exceeded what citizens were paying for private insurance, the initiative failed. England also experimented with socialized medicine in 1911, but this too was regarded as a failure. It wouldn’t be until the late 20th century that socialized medicine would gain traction as a sustainable national insurance program throughout Europe.

The movement for universal coverage in the United States goes back to the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, who first proposed the idea. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman also attempted to implement socialized medicine as part of their administrations’ legislative accomplishments, but it was killed

by a public campaign engineered by the American Medical Association which claimed, “Socialized medicine...will undermine the democratic form of government.”

Of course, social and political landscapes have changed since then, and this many socialized medicine proponents are quick to point out. Documentary filmmaker Michael Moore states in his film *Sicko* that a wealth of “socialized” services are common features of American society: fire departments, police, and public libraries are all federally and municipally funded, but they do not carry the same socialist hallmark of universal healthcare. Why the disparity? Is it irrational resistance or an undermining of democracy? And with literally all of the rest of the industrialized world moving toward federally funded healthcare, is it simply a matter of time before America jumps on board?

As the situation currently stands, America is the only wealthy, industrialized nation that does not provide universal healthcare. Most of the other nations which have adopted various versions of socialized medicine have not seen their democracies undermined by the transition to universal healthcare: the United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Israel, Denmark, Canada, and Australia can hardly be characterized as bastions of socialism. These countries refer to their systems as “universal healthcare” and “public healthcare.” Medical care is defined largely as a human right akin to freedom of speech or assembly which the government must guarantee.

To be sure, these systems are not without their drawbacks: it can take months in

certain situations to get to see a doctor or dentist, and six-month waiting lists are not uncommon. Also, medical personnel are in such high demand that they cannot meet the need of a citizenry unrestricted by the burden of payment; this can potentially lead to a downturn in the quality of healthcare, though this has not yet occurred in Europe. A recent study found that the U.S. ranks worst among 19 industrialized nations in terms of the number of preventable deaths and treatable conditions accrued in emergency rooms. France, Japan, and Australia (all with public healthcare) were ranked the best three.

Opponents of a universal system further point out that any such program is predicated on a number of significant disadvantages, including higher taxes, rationing of healthcare, and widespread expansion of federal bureaucracy. They also advocate the position that healthcare is not an individual right to be protected or provided by the government.

Unfortunately for its opponents, the social and political winds are blowing decidedly in favor of universal healthcare in America. Conservative opponents have been quite successful in scoring political brownie points by associating federal funding with socialism, regardless of the association’s lack of correlation with reality. Universal healthcare or socialized medicine — or whatever moniker it is ultimately given — will have to be reframed as a convergence of both individual and federal agency. With healthcare costs expected to double by 2017, it may simply be that Americans have no other choice.