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Health Care Scandal has Real Victims

by Jesse Jackson

It gets little attention, but it is deadly nonetheless. More than 200,000 women will get breast cancer in America this year. More than 40,000 will die from it. In comparison, we lost more than 50,000 men and women in Vietnam, and nearly 3,000 in Iraq.

A woman living in the United States today has a one in eight chance of developing breast cancer sometime in her life. For some, the cause is genetic. But obesity, alcohol consumption and lack of physical activity can contribute to the incidence.

Early detection is vital. Sixty-one percent of women 40 or over have had a mammogram within the past five years. Far too many have not.

While the incidence of breast cancer has risen, as detection methods improved, the death rate has been decreasing slowly since 1990. Early detection and improvements in treatment can make a difference.

Here, the horrors of the health system begin to take a toll. Not surprisingly, the death rate is far higher for those without health insurance and for people with lower incomes. They don't get regular mammograms. The disease can take root without detection. Death is too often the result.

The death rate of African-American women is 37 percent higher than that for white women, even though white women are more likely than African-American women to contract the disease after age 35. Hispanic women also suffer a higher death rate.

The U.S. health care system is an open scandal. We devote far more of our national income to health care than any other industrial nation. Yet we get worse results -- higher child mortality, higher deaths from breast cancer, less prevention and more expense. If you have wealth, the best medicine in the world is available to you. If you are poor, or increasingly a middle- or low-income family, too often you will lack insurance or be vastly underinsured. You will forgo costly tests and let illnesses fester until they become debilitating.

This is getting worse, not better. More and more small businesses simply don't offer health care for their employees. More and more large ones are imitating Wal-Mart and moving to part-time employees, who can't afford what plan is offered. They count on Medicaid to provide some coverage for their workers. We pay the highest drug prices in the world, even though the U.S. government pays for much of the research that develops the drugs.

The current Congress has stood idly by while the number of workers receiving no health benefits from their companies steadily increases. Then it gave the drug companies a billion-dollar bonanza by prohibiting Medicare from using its buying power to get better prices out of the companies for prescription drugs.

Every American, regardless of income, should have the right to quality health care. The nation should support aggressive prevention programs, which would not only help keep people healthier, but save taxpayers' money. All women should have the right to get regular mammograms -- and none should be condemned by lack of funds to the painful death of breast cancer.

This ought not be a partisan political issue, but a shared moral commitment. In 1992, Bill Clinton set out to guarantee affordable health care for all Americans. Conservatives organized to block his plan, but offered nothing in its stead. Now, 14 years later, more working Americans are without insurance, and 40,000 women will die of breast cancer this year. Isn't it time to put aside political maneuvers and get affordable health care done?

Various states are starting to move, with Illinois taking the lead. It's the only state where people on Medicaid can get a mammogram. Also, the state has raised more than \$3 million through its lottery -- a novel idea known as the Ticket for the Cure -- to fund breast cancer research as well as early detection and other patient services. But at the national level, there is no progress. The administration can commit more than \$300 billion to fight a war of choice in Iraq, but is cutting medical funding at home -- and has no plan for universal health care. The president says you're on your own. Too many women are discovering the costs of that default.

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