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VIEWPOINTS online print edition



'Sicko': A diagnosis in 5 parts

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Is *Sicko*, Michael Moore's diagnosis of our nation's health care system, an accurate documentary or pure propaganda? We asked six health care officials and other professionals to watch the movie and then give us their opinion via five questions.

1 Where is Michael Moore right in this movie?

Barbara J. Sutton: He is right in general in that the health care system in the United States needs to be overhauled. The examples he utilizes, some extreme, are meant to emphasize this point of view. But he does more than articulate the obvious - that health care is woefully inadequate, he weaves several human-interest stories with statistics to display the vulnerability of health care in the U.S.

Luther W. Goehring: It points out many flaws and failures that have developed within our health care system. It raises only questions and provides no answers. But it does point out that we do need to do something to change the existing system. There are three sides to every story. I'd like to hear the other two sides.

Bill Byron: I don't think anyone can disagree with Moore's position that access to health care and the cost of that care are huge problems in our country. After all, every year for the past five years there has been more than 43 million Americans without insurance. These issues can have a devastating impact on individuals and families, and he told some of their stories extremely well.

Sue Glawe: We agree that it is unacceptable that many Americans lack access to affordable health care coverage and that addressing deficiencies in the health care system is a top priority. Any effort to call attention to important health care issues is positive, and we welcome the debate that the movie is fostering about opportunities to improve the nation's health care system.

Daniel F. Mitten: Mr. Moore is absolutely right in driving the point home that the U.S. health care system is broken. He is correct in pointing out how power, greed and money have become more important than human life. I am quite certain that, although many of his facts and data can be construed in a multitude of ways to fit each person's viewpoint, he has shown some irrefutable and atrocious actions taken by government and the insurance carriers to fit their profit agenda. He is correct in revealing to the public that there is a major meltdown in our health system. It is interesting to note that if other countries were committing these deplorable acts upon their citizens under the guise of health care, the United States

would expose them and point an international finger at them. As it is happening here, it is swept under the carpet. Mr. Moore used specific medical horror stories to drive his point home, and that is obvious, but point well taken. He is correct: We must do something and now.

Daniel C. Coleman: I think he shines a bright light on some of our biggest problems: (a) we have almost 50 million people without health insurance; (b) some decisions about health care get made by the wrong people for the wrong reasons; (c) the price of prescription medications in our country is an outrage; and (d) the U.S. president and the Congress are clueless and/or in a state of denial with respect to health policy.

2 Where is he wrong in this movie?

Sutton: He ignores and fails to include any success stories about health care in the United States. One specific example: He failed to explore the research aspects of health care in the United States, aspects that lead to innovative solutions to medical dilemmas. He is wrong to paint the answer to the health care problem as a simple one because an issue like health care is not simplistic. It has multiple facets, multiple issues and multiple solutions.

Goehring: The examples of other countries he uses, particularly Cuba, misrepresent what really exists within their health care programs. Many, many citizens in Canada and England have their own private insurance coverage because they do not want to utilize the programs available to them at "no cost." In addition, the movie only presented "non-surgical" examples of health care treatments. No reference was made to the inability of other universal health care programs to provide tremendous amounts of capital to keep facilities up to date and provide the very latest in medical-surgical equipment as we do here in the USA.

Byron: Mr. Moore took some hard shots at specific organizations, yet he did not present their side in response to specific situations he presented nor what they (organizations) are doing to address these issues on a broader, national level.

Glawe: The movie focuses entirely on negative aspects of the U.S. health care system while ignoring the many positive aspects of the system. In addition, the perspectives of the companies that are the target of allegations presented in the movie are not presented to the viewer. So, it is not possible to make a balanced assessment of the system or the veracity of the positions presented in the movie based solely on the information presented in the film. Finally, *Sicko* includes many references to health care services in several of the featured national public health systems as being "free." Health care services in those countries are not free in that the citizens of those countries carry a significantly higher tax burden to pay for government-provided health care services.

Mitten: Mr. Moore is wrong in the sense that some of his points were overly dramatic, sensationalistic and intended to produce panic in the general public about their health care provider. Most people have a good, trusting relationship with their physician, and to not point this out and exaggerate the small minority of extreme cases is a little misleading. Mr. Moore implied, though not directly, that every aspect of our health system is greedy, corrupt and evil. This is simply not true. The physicians of Canada, France, England and Cuba portrayed in this film are no doubt fine physicians, but the fact of the matter is there are tens of thousands of outstanding, compassionate and highly skilled physicians in the United States that he never mentioned. It's unfortunate that he failed to mention any positive aspect of our system, especially the physicians.

Coleman: Saying that the movie is one-sided is an understatement. That one side seems to be that everything we do in the United States, from health care to employee benefits to day care for children, is inferior to how it is done in Cuba, France and Canada. Moore raved about the Cuban system but failed to mention that Cuba ranks worse than the United States in the WHO (World Health Organization) rankings. He gave the U.S. system no credit for the many wonderful things we do for patients.

3 Do you agree with his point that U.S. health care is not doing well compared with other countries?

Sutton: "Doing well" can have many meanings. No statistics were given about how many satisfied participants exist in the health care system in the United States. Only two or three countries were used as benchmarks in comparison to the

United States. However, if by "other countries" the question is directed at Canada, Great Britain and France, then the United States lags in the breadth of coverage for its citizens, preventive care and, most importantly, the amount of "worry" that the health care system in the United States engenders among its participants.

Goehring: In some ways. We do need to get the "profit motive" out of health care, (for example) for-profit hospitals; insurance companies with exorbitant executive salaries and bonuses predicated on "less treatment" principles; drug companies with considerable overpricing to take advantage of income generation; and shareholders who expect large dividends on their investments.

Byron: Mr. Moore presented data from the World Health Organization that placed the United States well below many other countries in childbirth and infant mortality. The data is the data, so it's hard to argue. However, there is data that shows that the United States does extremely well caring for people with other health issues, such as heart disease and cancer. Unfortunately, he excluded this kind of information.

Glawe: No. There are important issues that must be addressed in our system, but overall, we believe that the United States has the best health care system in the world. In fact, many nations look to the U.S. health system to learn how to coordinate care, promote wellness, manage chronic conditions, leverage health information technology and how to help patients avoid harmful drug interactions.

Mitten: Absolutely. Our system is broken. However, I do not agree that the European system and Canadian system are without flaws. There are many areas in which U.S. health care is far superior, especially in technology and timeliness. I agree with Mr. Moore that there are a multitude of aspects in the other systems that are appealing to us here in the United States, but we all know the grass is never greener on the other side. There are pros and cons to every health care system. It's our duty to analyze the good aspects and incorporate them into our own system, alleviating our own flaws. We must tend to our own health care needs first before we criticize others and immediately condemn their philosophies or ideas. We should be open-minded enough to admit that our system is extremely flawed but has many redeeming qualities that cannot be sacrificed.

Coleman: As a country with great resources and compassion, I think we can and should do better. Former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley commented in a speech at ASU last year that every bit of U.S. health policy has developed as a result of crisis. Our national political "leaders" have failed to address health care policy in a meaningful, thoughtful way. We need to get past the inflammatory language that politicians love and talk about the real issues.

4 Do you agree with universal health care? Why and how?

Sutton: Yes. Universal health care was one of the stated objectives of the 90th Arizona Town Hall held in Prescott, Arizona, in April. Being eligible for COBRA or post-COBRA coverage cannot be considered a success in itself if the cost of that current and post-COBRA coverage is economically prohibitive. Universal health care would necessarily lead to the treatment of those who are economically disadvantaged and have pre-existing conditions and would also provide incentives to health care providers to treat sick and ill patients as well as encourage preventive care. To exclude individuals from coverage in the long term will result in more substantial burdens on our health care system. As to the method of implementation, many different health care organizations have studied the issue and developed frameworks upon which the basic tenets of universal health care could be structured.

Goehring: Universal health care itself is not bad providing it does not include the opportunity for making profits off of the sick. Medical decisions should be made by medical practitioners and not by insurance claims clerks.

Byron: I agree with a solution in this country that vastly expands coverage. Such a solution depends on the ability of all those involved in health care to collaboratively create and implement a solution.

Glawe: We agree that everyone has the right to affordable, quality health care services. We support solutions that make private insurance options available and accessible to people who are currently without coverage. We are working closely with the medical and provider community and public officials to develop solutions to expand access to health insurance

and improve the level of care available to those in need.

Mitten: The term can be defined many ways. I agree that all humans have a right to quality health care regardless of systems. In the context of this film, I agree there are many appealing factors to the universal system and, while viewing the film, even I got drawn into this ultimate, blue-sky system that can serve all people. But as the film ended, I ended up in reality again. The Canadian, French and British model are very good systems for those countries. They work in those countries and for those citizens. There is a reason for that. Americans tend to be very litigious and impatient. We all want everything as soon as possible or we will sue. The universal systems in Canada and Europe do have lawsuits but only at a fraction of our system. I would agree with the universal system if it would eliminate the out-of-control legal nightmares that we not only condone but encourage, inflict upon our health care system. Americans tend to sue doctors for everything - not to harm the physician but to get the big money from the big insurance carriers. I would agree with the universal system if it removed the determination of medical necessity from the hands of those who are not medically trained at all and entrusted those decisions back on the physician where it belongs. A person's medical care is between a physician and a patient - not the insurance carriers, pre-auth departments, administrators and billing departments. I believe a combination of the two systems is the answer to the U.S. needs. If we could marry a universal approach with our private carriers - with unbiased, government-enforced regulations upon those carriers - then as inventive and ingenious as the American spirit is, I believe we can come up with a system that not only fixes our problems but outshines any other model. We must remove the politics, lobbyists and deep pockets before that will ever have a chance of happening.

Coleman: Despite what was portrayed in *Sicko*, the emergency rooms of America's hospitals take care of everyone who comes to them, regardless of their ability to pay or any other factor. I would love to see everyone in our country have access to primary care and to low-cost medications. I think it would save money by avoiding more costly, acute care. But there's no free lunch, and I think Michael Moore oversimplified the complexity of the issue.

5 Overall, how would you rate this movie? Would you recommend it?

Sutton: The movie was very thought provoking and evoked feelings on many levels: economic, care giving and for those in the health care field the ability to solve problems for patients and insureds. If Moore's work means anything, it is that the time has come to implement solutions - not just talk about them in forums designed to perpetrate debate and little else. Yes, I would recommend this movie.

Goehring: I believe this movie should be seen by all. It certainly makes one wonder if there isn't a better way to provide health care to all who need it. Michael Moore should contribute all the profits he makes off of this movie to provide medical care to individuals who cannot pay for their care - and then not boast about it.

Byron: Michael Moore is a gifted storyteller, and *Sicko* is a tremendous example of his vast talent. Whether you agree with him or not, *Sicko* does place a burning spotlight on a defining and challenging issue for our country. If this movie can get masses talking about this issue and, as a result, motivate leaders to act on this issue, it will have served a tremendous service. I highly recommend *Sicko*.

Glawe: The movie is thought provoking and effectively presents Mr. Moore's position for a socialized health care system. However, it does so through selective use of information and omission of opposing viewpoints, so we encourage viewers to examine all the facts regarding the issues presented in order to make a balanced assessment.

Mitten: I would rate this movie as very good. I liked it overall and would definitely recommend it. I would put a disclaimer on my recommendation, though, that one has to be open-minded in viewing it. There are always two sides to every story, and much of what was presented could very well have been dramatized to exaggerate a point. It is a disturbing film and makes one think about our system. The film was very satirical but drives many poignant points home. It is not meant to be a solution to our problems but, I believe, to stimulate thought and action to do something about our current situation. Something is better than nothing.

Coleman: Because I work in health care, I've heard a great deal about this topic for many years - all more thoughtful and intellectually honest than this movie. Having said that, I realize it sometimes takes some hyperbole to attract attention and

to galvanize us as a country. If this movie can do that, it will have been worthwhile.