

The Health Myth



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Americans enjoy the best healthcare system in the world... True or false?

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Americans enjoy the best healthcare system in the world!

If only that were true. The statement, widely regarded – at least in the U.S. – as factual, is arguable from a number of perspectives.

According to data from the World Health Organization, Americans rank:

- 1st in healthcare expenditures
- 37th in overall health system performance
- 72nd on level of health

At least there is agreement that it is the most expensive system in the world. No other country spends 14% of its gross domestic product on healthcare. No other country can top our average expenditures of around (USD) \$4,000 per person per year, an amount staggering in its own rite when you consider that it is greater than the average family income of more than half the world's population. OK, so we don't get what we pay for. Are we getting what we want? Not according to the pollsters. In a recent poll from Blueprint, only 71% acknowledged that they were "very satisfied" with their primary doctor, a rating that would be disastrous for most competitive businesses. Their biggest source of dissatisfaction? Their doctor is too busy to spend quality time when they need it.

So if we don't get good value, and we're not happy about it, why don't Americans shop for alternatives? Well, actually we are. In fact some estimates hold that for every two dollars spent in the traditional healthcare system, Americans spend another dollar for so-called alternative healthcare. How much longer will this growth trend have to continue before the traditional methods will be considered the alternative?

Let's face it. We are chasing the wind if we believe that the American healthcare system is the best in the world. It's a myth – an "imaginary or unverifiable thing" according to Merriam-Webster. We're secretly voting with our feet by looking to alternatives, and the insiders of the healthcare system seem like they're the last ones to find out.

Sociologists might chuckle to themselves at this situation. They would recognize it as a typical case of cognitive dissonance. We hate to admit our discontent when we've invested so much in this myth. It's better to perpetuate the myth than to slay it. Look how foolish we would appear if we turned against such a formidable institution – and one of our own making, at that.

Doctors aren't chuckling, however. In fact, doctors, on the whole, are pretty discouraged about the whole situation. Most of them were attracted to medicine to do good, but now they are finding, much to their chagrin, that doing good doesn't always pay the bills. They're not eating from the bottom of the trough, mind you, but they're losing heart a little more with every discounted payment and new regulation.

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The real irony is that even if we fixed the healthcare system – whatever that might mean – we still would all die of something or other. We may have extended our life expectancy by thirty years in the past century, (although most of those gains came from public health and sanitation improvements rather than medical discoveries) but our death expectancy is exactly the same – 100%. If we were hoping to postpone it indefinitely, we'd really be fooling ourselves.

Now that puts things in a different perspective, doesn't it? What is health, anyway, if not the postponement of death?

My answer may surprise you, because it has nothing to do with the healthcare system, even though I'm an insider to that system. I've worked in healthcare administration and consulting my whole career, advising physicians in particular, about how to design and build sound medical practices.

To define health as a product of compassionate doctors, high-tech hospitals, brilliant researchers and medical schools fails, in my view, to capture the real goal. The ultimate definition of health needs to somehow blend a sense of well-being, regardless of one's physical and emotional circumstances. Health, in my book, is a state of contentment that comes, sometimes, in spite of the healthcare system rather than because of it. It is a condition of mind and soul as much as of body. Health is a certain readiness for anything, despite the pain or discomfort. In this sense, anyone can live a healthy life that co-exists with mental or physical anguish. I can even envision the ultimate oxymoron – a *healthy death* – a sense of well-being that comes from transcendent readiness, even when facing our personal mortality.

Where does that kind of health come from, if not from the healthcare system?

It comes from dispelling the myth about the healthcare system, for one thing. It comes from expecting less than our technological capabilities are capable of producing. It comes from discernment and real, timeless wisdom, about when enough is enough. Health and well-being comes, it seems, from accepting that we're going to die. How's that for irony? And yet, that may be the most profound truth to guide us in the further development of the healthcare system.

We have lots of experience at making a bad situation worse. True to our heritage, we have frequently applied the theory that it is better to do something than to do nothing at all to solve our problems. Along the way, we have built competing specialty centers, diluting the effectiveness of either one; consolidated physicians into less-cohesive work groups; and contorted a prevention-oriented financing system into a weaker version of the same old pay-for-illness institution.

So if we know what doesn't work, and we know we're going to die anyway, why bother trying to improve the healthcare system at all?

So we can live better – in more ways than one. That's why.

If we redefine health as contentment rather than the absence of morbidity, we expect less, and get more from those whom we have anointed as our healers. We can look to them for wisdom as fully as we look to them for information. They can be our knowledgeable guides on the path toward the inevitable, urging us to do what we can for our own contentment, and supplementing our efforts judiciously along the way. We can restore them to their rightful position of confidante rather than god. We can let them be people again, and we can let the healing relationship work its own wonders.

What's the worst that could happen? Might our life expectancy decline again? Would we be sick more? My guess is that the opposite would be true. We claim to

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know so much about the science and technology of medicine, but we know so little about the potential of healing relationships. We have a few clues from social research, though. We know that married people live longer. We know that placebos can have a powerful effect on our ability to heal ourselves. We know that prayer can shorten recovery times.

If we modify the definition of health, I can envision a dramatically different design for the healthcare system. Rather than doing all we can to prolong life, we would do all we can to enrich it. Rather than denying death, we would meet it on its own terms. Rather than expecting the professionals to make us healthy, we might begin to look more closely at our personal responsibilities. We would use high-tech options more judiciously, decreasing their investment appeal. We would reward physicians for the sake of the healing relationship rather than for doing something – anything – to assure us that we are not accountable for our own health. We might incorporate others into our circle of healers, like family and friends, pastors and teachers – anyone who can help us in our quest for contentment, regardless of whether their services are covered by insurance or not.

Maybe health-as-contentment is still a myth – an “imaginary or unverifiable thing.” But it is far less costly, emotionally and financially, to society than our current myth. It can become a myth we can live with – and die with. It makes me wonder. Are we rich in technology, but impoverished in discernment? What might be possible if we pursue contentment in the next century as vigorously as we pursued medical science and technology in the last?