

Proper health care for all

Although Unitarian Universalists do not all proclaim the same religious beliefs, we do share values, many of which are identified in our principles.

One of the principles calls us "to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

I'm sure Unitarian Universalism isn't unique among religious traditions in placing great emphasis on these values.

If I'm correct about that, then it seems obligatory for those of us whose traditions are guided by such values to call for change to our nation's health care system because it denies justice, equity and compassion to so many in our country.

An Aug. 12 New York Times editorial asserted: "Many Americans are under the delusion that we have 'the best health care system in the world,' as President Bush sees it. ... That may be true at many top medical centers. But the disturbing truth is that this country lags well behind other advanced nations in delivering timely and effective care."

The editorial cited a study by the Commonwealth Fund, a private foundation that promotes a high-performing health care system. The study measured the quality of health care in several countries. It found that while U.S. medicine did very well in some categories, it did less well in a sufficient number of categories that our country's overall quality rating put us in last place.

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Drawing upon the study's findings, the Times editor asserted: "All other major industrialized nations provide universal health coverage, and most of them have comprehensive benefit packages with no cost-sharing by the patients. The United States, to its shame, has some 45 million people without health insurance and many more millions who have poor coverage."

Since the study was completed, the number of uninsured increased to 47 million in 2006.

One of the clear consequences of this, as the study also determined, is that the U.S. is "dead last on almost all measures of equity because we have the greatest disparity in the quality of care given to richer and poorer citizens."

A New Yorker cartoon drolly sums up the situation as it portrays a doctor standing before a patient seated on the exam table, giving him his diagnosis: "Unfortunately," he tells the man, "you have what we call 'no insurance.'"

The state of our health care system is such that, indeed, it seems it must be a joke.

But more truly, it's a tragedy and our great national shame that so many in our country are denied adequate access to health care because they have no insurance.

I believe we must have universal, comprehensive health care.

It's a matter of justice, equity and compassion.

I contend that our system bespeaks of classism in its worst manifestation, pitting the wealthy and powerful interests in this nation against the most vulnerable, the working class and the middle class.

Among other things, tying our health insurance to employment creates a compelling means to control the work force.

Of course, whatever health care system we institute will be imperfect given our inherent imperfections and given that resources, however distributed, are finite.

Nonetheless, our system constitutes a gross injustice with so many people denied access to the most basic kinds of health care while others wallow in treatments that are sometimes superfluous.

The English novelist George Eliot once observed: "Justice is like the Kingdom of God. It is not without us as a fact; it is within us as a great yearning."

May our yearning be such that we persevere in establishing universal comprehensive health care so all people in our country will be equitably served.

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