



Ethical Approaches to Public Policy for Health: A Focus on Principles and Working Together

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Commentary

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Abstract

News about the healthcare crisis, including strikes in multiple countries, workforce shortages, ambulance diversion and delays on entry to emergency rooms, closing floors while demand for beds increases, long waits for appointments in primary and specialty care, and shortages of supplies and medications all lead to proposed solutions for each issue. The point must be noted that these also point to some basic questions. This Commentary calls for a “back to basics” approach that requires dialogue (not just talking but listening) and a focus on some of our primary principles.

Keywords: Healthcare Crisis; Workforce Shortages; Primary Principles

Introduction

Today we are struck by headlines across the world regarding a healthcare crisis. Workforce strikes on both sides of the Atlantic, long waits for essential services – and even basic services, inability to access needed materials and pharmaceuticals, and seemingly purposeful dissemination of mistruths and half-truths all point to a need for critical intervention. One of the dangers we face is getting so involved in critical individual issues and political struggles we miss the opportunity to look at real problems we need to meet to make a difference. Please don't mistake our thinking; we need to address the individual issues and each aspect of healthcare mentioned above where we are currently challenged. We must address them based on a principled approach with a meaningful dialogue.

When considering writing this piece, it was easy to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the issues that require

attention and the obstacles we face. We were then reminded of some wisdom that came before us. One mentor had a saying: “never waste a good crisis.” Another vital quote recently highlighted applies here from Frances Perkins (US Secretary of Labor under President Franklin Roosevelt) “A government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life. “When we think of these critical thoughts through the lens of Beauchamp and Childress [1] and look closely at the issues at hand, thinking about Autonomy (informed decision making for ourselves); Beneficence (intention for good); Non-maleficence (avoidance of harm); and Justice (requiring fairness for all), the issues before us have more clarity and opportunity for improvement.

First, we must recommit ourselves to those ideas and principles we hold dear. Statements in the US, like “all people, are created equal,” and we have some essential responsibilities to one another as we live in the community. These critical responsibilities have been defined over time as

society and science have evolved, including public education, public health, public utilities, and criminal justice. To the degree that access to healthcare is one of these ideas, we need to get back to basics and remember the quotes above. Allow me to share some thoughts on how we can get there.

Some of the critical issues we see today are symptomatic of more basic underlying structural problems that must be addressed if more permanent solutions are to be developed. For example, in instances where there are labor disputes (i.e., Strikes), long delays, and impediments to access, we need to ask some critical questions:

1. Is there an adequate workforce?
2. Are there professional education opportunities and incentives adequate to continuously build the workforce needed to operate the complex system of healthcare we require?
3. Are public entities investing adequately in the workforce (nationally, in states, and communities)?
4. Do payors (private and public) adequately reimburse care at levels that support this workforce?

These questions need open discussion under the light of the principles I mentioned above and with the wisdom of Secretary Perkins lighting the way.

On the question of adequate supply, in one example, we heard and saw comparisons of current insulin pricing internationally [2]. The average US price for a unit in the referenced report was \$98.70; the non-US average was \$8.81. There is something amiss that needs to be addressed. Comparatively, this is one minor example of the opportunity to address supply questions. These questions must be asked to address systems issues and ensure that public funds are invested wisely and that people can access critical medications and supplies.

When we apply the lens mentioned above, we must also ask difficult questions about immediate access to care. We know that uninsured people are less healthy, more likely to incur ongoing costs (from chronic conditions), and more likely to incur high charges for emergent care – much of which is preventable. Population-wide chronic diseases account for over 86% of healthcare costs, much of which is preventable [3]. Another set of critical questions comes to mind:

1. Is our current system of funding healthcare (a mix of public and private “insurance”) the best way to proceed?
2. Should we find ways to offer preventive care to all to reduce the financial and human burden of preventable chronic and emergent care?
3. Should we invest in raising awareness throughout the population on ways we can all improve our health and reduce the risk of severe chronic conditions (including Alzheimer’s disease and mental health [4-6])?

4. Would additional access to primary care reduce chronic and emergent care needs broadly?
5. If so, how can we achieve this by maintaining high-quality standards of care?

Conclusion

This same process must be engaged in healthcare today’s other fundamental issues. This piece is a challenge to the reader and leaders in the public and private sectors to engage in this dialogue. Don’t be tempted to shortcut solutions or be misled by misinformation or disinformation [7]. Suppose we are to achieve long-term health security, prevent conditions ripe for prevention, and improve our collective health for tomorrow. In that case, taking the challenging course of the dialogue, listening to others, focusing on science, and always using the lens of principles is the right way to proceed.

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