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Daniel Weintraub: Moore on health insurance: Entertaining but flawed

By Daniel Weintraub -

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Michael Moore almost had me going -- until he got to the part about the laundry.

Moore's latest film, "Sicko," careens like a runaway truck through the worst ills of the U.S. health care industry. It then sets those foibles against the best traits of government-run systems in Canada, Great Britain, France and, yes, Cuba.

At turns funny, shocking and just plain sad, the documentary builds a solid indictment of private health insurance. Moore slams one firm for retroactively denying coverage to a woman who failed to disclose a yeast infection on her application. Another issued a fatal order denying treatment for a toddler who had the bad luck to arrive at the wrong emergency room. A third billed a woman for an ambulance ride after an accident because her trip to the hospital had not been preapproved.

It is stuff like this that drives so many Americans crazy about their health care system. And if people conclude that they cannot depend on private insurance to cover them when they need care, it's not a big leap from there to decide that the nation does not need the services of such an industry.

That is exactly Moore's point.

"Take the health insurance companies out of the mix," he said in Sacramento Tuesday after a preview showing of the film that will open across the nation on June 29. He is an unabashed supporter of a single-payer health care system financed with taxes and overseen by the government.

But while his film might be effective as propaganda, it is also flawed.

It is a hodgepodge of anecdotes, hasty conclusions and glaring omissions layered one on top of another until the viewer is almost forced to submit to Moore's thesis. Among the problems:

- Moore begins by insisting that his story will be about people who have insurance, not those who go without. But some of his most vivid examples -- such as a man who loses two fingers in an accident and can only afford to pay for one of them to be reattached -- are about people who do not have any coverage at all.
- He blames all of the industry's bad behavior on the profit motive. But one of his biggest villains -- Kaiser Permanente -- is a nonprofit. And while he does a gut-wrenching segment on Los Angeles hospitals dumping homeless patients back on the street after they are treated, he mentions only in passing that one of the guilty parties is a public hospital owned by the government. Aren't those the same people he wants to put in charge of all of our health care?
- He tells the gripping story of a man who died of cancer after his health plan refused to pay for

experimental treatment. But he never asks his audience to consider that no matter what kind of system we have, it will not provide unlimited care, especially experimental care. There will always be a gatekeeper.

Under a single-payer plan, that person would be a government employee -- some might even say a bureaucrat. Would that really be any better?

Moore never gets around to telling us that the underfunded Canadian and British systems have such long waiting lists that the Canadian Supreme Court struck down a ban on private health care, and the British are buying insurance to supplement their government coverage.

The climax of the movie takes us to Cuba, a place Moore lionizes without even a passing reference to Fidel Castro's crimes against his own people. Had Moore been a Cuban and tried to challenge the government the way he does here, he would have been snuffed out or locked up long ago, not given "free" health care.

And then there is France. After getting almost orgasmic over the quality of French health care, Moore goes on to extol the virtues of paid maternity leave, mandatory minimum vacations, 35-hour workweeks, nearly free day care and, finally, a government service that sends a person to your home twice a week to clean your clothes after you have a baby.

Oblivious to France's economic doldrums, its chronic high unemployment or projections showing that the country's cradle-to-grave social benefits are unsustainable, Moore turns the laundry service into his ideal of civilization at its finest.

It never occurs to him that, instead, it might be embarrassing evidence of what happens to people when they expect the government to tend to their every need. Health care can be a life or death matter. But laundry?

Moore is right that we need to fix our health insurance system, and his film at its best forces us to think about whether we all should do more to help each other deal with the cost of illness and injury that strike the population more or less at random.

But when he ends the movie on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, laundry basket in hand, prepared to demand the kind of service he saw in France, his satire turns on itself. That is exactly the kind of ridiculous extension of dependency that opponents of single-payer health care fear will be the inevitable result of the ever-expanding government Moore advocates.

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