

Opinion

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Are we running out of health care?

THE COST of keeping well has been climbing into the stratosphere. If you've been to the hospital lately, you may have suffered a setback when you discovered that two or three days of hospitalization could cost thousands of dollars.

The only thing that has saved most of us from financial ruin over medical bills is insurance. Business firms have frequently paid the premiums, and the insurance companies, to a greater or lesser extent, have paid the bills.

Ironically, however, this cushion for the consumer is often cited as one of the basic problems in rising health care costs.

The theory is that the patient has no incentive to seek lower costs when few of them are his or her responsibility. The health care providers likewise have no reason for restraint when they are guaranteed payment for their services.

ONE SOLUTION proposed is to require co-payment by the patient for all medical care. There are other suggestions for reducing health care costs, none of them particularly



Jeanette Katz

palatable to those of us accustomed to the present system.

One would involve voucher systems for Medicare and Medicaid patients to obtain health care from private insurance companies instead of the government. By implication, any excess charges would be paid by the patient.

Another would remove business tax deductions for health care premiums on the theory that such action would force both workers and employers to be more cost-conscious. Such a solution would also leave most business firms unwilling to pay insurance premiums. There's been a lot of discussion about preferred provider insurance.

THIS SORT of insurance would offer regular benefits only if they are provided by a carefully selected set of preferred physicians and hospitals, presumably the least expensive. In some ways this is similar to another alternative, the health maintenance organization, where a set of physicians in a central location provide total care for its members in return for a fixed fee.

There are philosophical as well as economic implications in the debate over health care costs. If costs continue to escalate, there is a real question as to whether health care will be available as a right for all or as a privilege for the few who can afford it.

There are also implications for the elderly in our population. If health care becomes scarce and even more costly, will it be allocated exclusively to the younger members of society?

THE QUESTION of allocation already arises as more organ transplants in insufficient supply are medically feasible. Health care providers must play God in deciding who will be given an opportunity to survive. Significantly, one of the factors is the ability to pay the astronomical cost.

We should remember that the most effective cost-cutting measure available is prevention. Most health problems can be traced to our social and physical environment and personal life styles.

Eating, drinking and smoking habits, overuse of drugs, mental stress, violence and environmental factors are all underlying causes of much of our need for health care. These factors are at least partially under our control.

oral quarrel

This week's Oral Quarrel question asked readers:

If you were the budget director, in what economic areas would you disagree with Ronald Reagan? What measures would you recommend to cut government spending?

Following are the responses:

For a start, immediately give the President line-item veto power and limit members of Congress to two terms of office and make a drastic cut in their staff. Our founding fathers never intended that a citizen stint in the Legislative Branch should become a career.

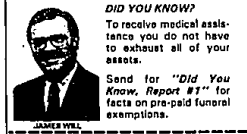
How about cutting the cost of Congress itself? It was reported two years ago that it was then costing the taxpayers half a billion dollars a year per member of Congress to maintain them.

This includes the senators and representatives and their ungleated aide salaries, the office building to house them, their allowances perks and subsidies.

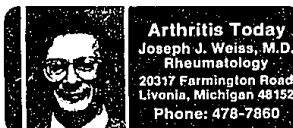
Multiply this by the current 535 and you come to the tidy sum of \$287 billion 500 million dollars a year which in itself is considerably more than the projected annual deficit. Are we getting our money's worth from that particular expenditure?



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USE OF ICE IN TREATING ARTHRITIS

The application of heat to inflamed joints is traditional treatment in arthritis. Heat results in an increased blood flow which in turn sweeps away the chemical irritants causing joint pain and swelling.

If you apply cold to a joint, the blood vessels to the area will constrict, causing blood flow to decrease markedly. The activators of inflammation which reside in the blood stream are unable to reach the joint, and the site is spared initiation of inflammation. This effect of cold is the reason that you put ice on a fresh bruise or tendon sprain.

Since inflammation in arthritis is recurrent and prolonged, it would seem unlikely that application of cold would have a beneficial effect. However, ice numbs the sore area around the joint and in doing so provides immediate pain relief. Furthermore, cooling inhibits chemical reactions in general, and is very effective in stopping the specific products of inflammation.

In treating arthritis, heat is still the first choice for obtaining immediate relief. When it fails, turning to cold is appropriate for the reasons just described.

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Can you top this?

THE OTHER afternoon when the thermometer registered 90 degrees The Stroller sat back and thought about some of the things he has heard in his career. Here are a few:

One of the best was just before a game with the New York Yankees at Then Briggs Stadium. Mrs. Walter Briggs, wife of the Tigers owner at the time, was in a box seat along the first base line. When the Yankees came out to practice, she noticed that Yankee catcher Yogi Berra, who could murder the English language, was wearing short sleeves.

Mrs. Briggs called out: "You sure look cool, Mr. Berra."

HE SMILED and noticing that she was dressed in black, as usual, answered: "You don't look so hot yourself."

When the Yankees were in town for a night game and dusk was setting in, Yogi remarked: "It sure gets late here early."

"Shorty" Moran, president of the amateur baseball league in Detroit, once tired of hearing people introduced with the phrase, "Now, without further adieu." He took the gavel, banged it and said, "We'll have no more of this further adieu. It is just a question of do you want it or don't you."

HE CALLED on the sports editor of the morning paper once seeking publicity for a big sandlot game. Pounding his fist on the editor's desk, he said: "It is going to be a stupendous game. It will be colossal. In fact, it might be mediocre."

"Punch" Christman, manager of the Macungie team back home, brought in his score sheet every Sunday night and explained what happened. One night, he told The Stroller: "We beat them in everything but runs. We had more errors, more dropped fly balls, more passed balls and even more runners trapped off bases."

The Stroller likes to recall Davy Ech, a little Dutchman back home. One day as a funeral procession passed, a fellow asked him, "Who's dead?" Davey quickly answered, "The man in the first car."

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