

'Era of death control looms,' Califano says

AP — Former presidential aide and Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr. warned recently of a pending health care crisis that threatens to turn into "an era of death control."

Califano told the annual conference of the Miami Valley Gerontology Council that unless solutions are found, ever more expensive technical advances and an aging population could make health care unaffordable even for the most affluent and force the government to ration health services.

"Uncle Sam will soon be playing King Solomon with your father and mother and mine, and with you and me," Califano told about 400 people at the conference on ways to help the elderly become more self-sufficient.

"America is at the dawn of the first four-generation society in the history of our world," Califano said.

Solutions are urgently needed "under threat that society will be torn apart by a debate over death control that will make the debate over abortion seem like genteel tea party chatter," he said.

Califano, one of the fathers of the Great Society as President Lyndon Johnson's chief domestic adviser and HEW secretary from 1967 to 1969, acknowledged that Medicare was supposed to control costs and solve some of the problems of health care for the elderly by spreading risk, but "we got blown out of the water."

There still are too many wide variations between the cost and type of care in different parts of the country, Califano said.

"We all assumed since World War II that more was better without assessing the correlation between higher cost and quality care."

— Joseph Califano Jr.
former Health, Education and Welfare Secretary

AP Wirephoto

He said reforms are likely now because legislators and professionals are scared of the possible consequences. However, he predicted that legislation for federal coverage of long-term and home health care won't pass this year.

Califano said he expects that in the next few years Congress will mandate that all employers provide some kind of health care insurance, which will cover about two-thirds of the 37 million people lacking coverage.

The others will have to be covered by the government, and that will mean higher taxes or fees, he said.

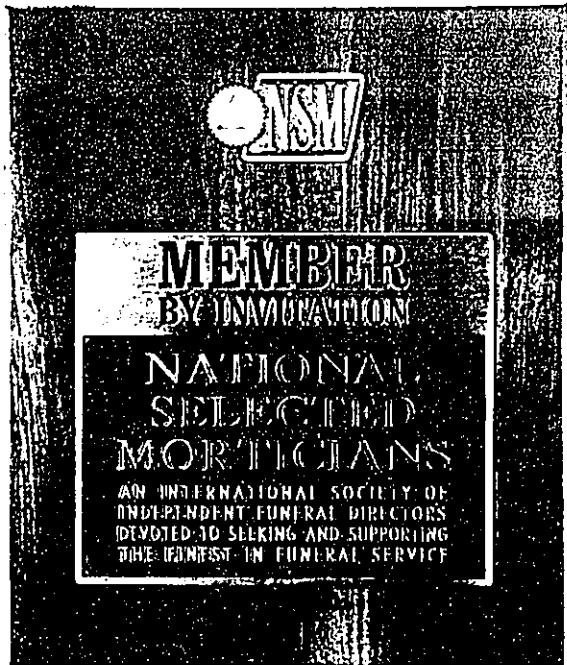
Califano, now a director of Chrysler Corp., said that company significantly cut its \$300 million yearly health care bill by doing detailed studies of who was being hospitalized and why, and by aggressively negotiating with health-care providers.

"We all assumed since World War II that more was better without assessing the correlation between higher cost and quality care," he said.

Califano said the nation should:

- Eliminate 400,000 unnecessary hospital beds, concentrating surgical procedures in fewer hospitals.
- Make more information available about how hospitals and doctors charge and treat successfully.
- Promote hospice and home care.
- Overhaul the medical malpractice system so doctors don't feel more tests are necessary.
- Emphasize research on aging and addiction.

"We should loosen the hammerlock monopoly doctors have on the practice of medicine," Califano said. "Today, nurses can provide a host of tasks once performed by doctors."



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