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## OP-ED COLUMNIST

## A Second Opinion

By **BOB HERBERT**

Published: June 28, 2004

In an article a few years ago in The Journal of the American Medical Association, Dr. Barbara Starfield of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine took a look at the overall health of the American people, and compared conditions here to those in other industrialized countries.

What she found was disturbing.

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"The fact is that the U.S. population does not have anywhere near the best health in the world," she wrote. "Of 13 countries in a recent comparison, the United States ranks an average of 12th (second from the bottom) for 16 available health indicators."

She said the U.S. came in 13th, dead last, in terms of low birth weight percentages; 13th for neonatal mortality and infant mortality over all; 13th for years of potential life lost (excluding external causes); 11th for life expectancy at the age of 1 for females and 12th for males; and 10th for life expectancy at the age of 15 for females and 12th for males.

She noted in the article that more than 40 million Americans lacked health insurance (the figure is about 43 million now) and she described the state of Americans' health as "relatively poor."

"U.S. children are particularly disadvantaged," she said, adding, "But even the relatively advantaged position of elderly persons in the United States is slipping. The U.S. relative position for life expectancy in the oldest age group was better in the 1980's than in the 1990's."

The article was published in the summer of 2000. At the time Japan ranked highest among developed countries in terms of health, and the United States ranked among the lowest.

Last week I talked with Dr. Starfield, an internationally respected physician, professor and researcher, and asked whether the situation had improved over the last four years.

"It's getting worse," she said, noting, "We've done a lot more studies in terms of the international comparisons. We've done them a million different ways. The findings are so robust that I think they're probably incontrovertible."

The U.S. has the most expensive health care system on the planet, but millions of Americans without access to care die from illnesses that could have been successfully treated if diagnosed in time. Poor people line up at emergency rooms for care that should be provided in a doctor's office or clinic. Each year tens of thousands of men, women and children die from medical errors and many more are maimed.

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But when you look for leadership on these issues, you find yourself staring into the void. If you want to get physicians' representatives excited, ask them about tort reform, not patient care. Elected officials give lip service to health care issues, but at the end of the campaign day their allegiance goes to the highest bidders, and they are never the people who put patients first.

To get a sense of just how backward we're becoming on these matters, consider that in places like Texas, Florida and Mississippi the politicians are dreaming up new ways to remove the protective cloak of health coverage from children, the elderly and the poor. Texas and Florida have been pulling the plug on coverage for low-income kids. And Mississippi recently approved the deepest cut in Medicaid eligibility for senior citizens and the disabled that has ever been approved anywhere in the U.S.

Even the affluent are finding it more difficult to obtain access to care. For patients with insurance the route to treatment is often a confusing maze of gatekeepers and maddening regulations. The costs of insurance are shifting from employers to employees, and important health decisions are increasingly being made by bureaucrats and pitchmen interested solely in profits.

In the maddening din that passes for a national conversation in this country, distinguished voices like Dr. Starfield's are not easily heard.

Echoing so many other patient advocates, she continues to call for movement on two crucial needs: coverage for the many millions who currently do not have access to care, and the development of a first-rate primary care system, which would bring a sense of coherence to a health care environment that is both chaotic and wildly expensive.

"We don't have any national health policy at all in this country," said Dr. Starfield.

And there is no sign of that changing anytime soon.

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