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Rhetoric turns bizarre in U. S. health-care debate

Posted By MINDELLE JACOBS, SUN MEDIA

Posted 1 day ago

The shri ll , misinformed opponents of Barack Obama's proposal to reform America's expensive and inequitable health-care system should be in Los Angeles this week.

There they'd see thousands of poor, uninsured and under-insured Americans lined up for free medical care provided by volunteers, thanks to an amazing organization called Remote Area Medical (RAM).

The Tennessee-based group began more than two decades ago as a mobile relief force to provide health care to people in the world's most inaccessible regions.

RAM, for instance, has an air ambulance based in Guyana, as well as a cervical cancer team that travels by jeep, plane, ox cart and canoe through the rainforest to treat hundreds of village women.

But 60% of the group's expeditions are in the U. S., the richest country in the world. After Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans in 2005, RAM medical volunteers treated more than 5,000 people. Presumably, many of those people hadn't seen a doctor in years because they couldn't afford it.

And now RAM has set up shop in an arena in Inglewood, an L. A. suburb, to give people free dental, vision and medical care. Patients are getting everything from fillings, root canals and glasses to mammograms, Pap smears and general physicals.

Undoubtedly, those receiving free medical care consider it something of a miracle since there are 47 million Americans who have no medical insurance.

Contrast that with the raucous and ridiculous rantings of some U. S. politicians and ordinary Americans who've crowded into public forums in recent days decrying the Democrats' attempts to overhaul the U. S. health-care system.

"This is about the dismantling of this country," one woman told a Pennsylvania forum on Tuesday, according to the New York Times. "We don't want this country to turn into Russia."

"They are talking about killing people," declared another woman. Perhaps she's a fan of former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin who maintains a proposed bill would create "death panels" that would pressure sick elderly people to forego eatment.

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In an even stranger turn, an editorial in the Investor's Business Daily absurdly argued that disabled physicist Stephen Hawking "wouldn't have a chance in the U. K.," suggesting the National Health Service would deem him "worthless."

Hawking retorted in a British newspaper that he wouldn't be here without the NHS and the business paper retracted its remarks.

But the fear-mongering continues. According to Republican Congressman Paul Broun, the U. K. and Canada "don't have the appreciation of life as we do in our society."

Let's see. In Canada and the U. K., everyone gets medical coverage. You don't have to sell your house to get a heart bypass and you're not denied insurance if you've got a preexisting condition.

"Once you get sick, they'll go looking through your paperwork for any little thing that got misstated and they'll take away the insurance," explains Raisa Deber, a health policy expert at the University of Toronto.

"If you want to have a debate, have (it) about the facts," she says. "Don't have a debate by scaring people."

Listen up, America. The U. S. spends 16% of its GDP -- the highest share in the OECD -- on health care. Yet America's infant mortality and life expectancy figures -- key measures of population health -- are worse than those of both Canada and the U. K. Swallow those facts and call us in the morning.

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It's worth paying attention to this debate going on in the U.S., not so much for content, but for form. It amazes me (and I'm a pretty cynical person) the amount of air-play given over to innuendo and outright falsehoods, which go unchallenged from a very uncritical media. Indeed, the media continues to promote those falsehoods, even in circumstances where the falsehoods are debunked by the same media outlets. The conversation about "death panels" is a great example, but also look at the curious notion that President Obama was not born in Hawaii (not a health care debate, but the same process has been occurring...the story has been debunked, but still major media outlets are giving it play).

Why is this happening? Aren't the journalists out there in Media-land supposed to be about unearthing the truth? Isn't that Woodward and Bernstein did with Watergate after all? Dig down and unearth the truth?

Well...that was then, this is now, and anyone who thinks that the media hasn't changed is living in a fantasy-land. The Media exists to sell products, so of course the most titillating news stories are the ones which are going to get the air play. Talk of Death Panels, even if only to discuss how preposterous the idea is, is a perfect example. Look at the article you've just read, which is all about some of the more outrageous claims made during this debate. What is the purpose of repeating those claims here? In part, it's to have you read the article, buy the paper, and read its advertising. Why wouldn't you want to be titillated by the nonsense going on south of the border?

Of course, it's not just south of the border. This type of journalism has crept into Canadian culture, passing itself off here too as informed debate. Look at the last election. Can you name any policies of any of the Party's which the media reported on? Maybe Stephane Dion's carbon tax comes to mind, but that's about it. But do you remember the pooping puffin, or the CTV video tape of Dion messing up answering questions, asking for a do-over? The last election was all about Form triumphing over substance. And certainly coverage given to the "Coalition Crisis" was

largely in the same vein as well (although a few journalists did go to lengths to report to Canadians about how our institutional structure actually works...which is a bit of a shame that more Canadians don't understand the structure of our own government, in which they participate by casting a vote).

Why report on facts when innuendo and lies are much more interesting? Plus, don't you think that the powers that be are happy knowing that the public remains disengaged from an informed debate? That way, they can do whatever they want, knowing there isn't anyone looking over their shoulders. The Media used to do a good job of keeping our government in check, but in 2009, the media too can no longer be trusted to "out" the falsehoods. It's now fallen to each of us to do so, and it's true, who has time for that? But if we don't, we end up getting the government we deserve: a government disinterested in doing what is right, and interested instead only in being seen to do whatever is believed to be right, based on opinion polls and what the media tells us is right.

In the U.S., look no further than the health care debate. In Canada, look at the climate change crisis and the complete lack of activity there by any of the major parties. Why, just this weekend, the NDP had the opportunity to show leadership on a number of issues, but instead chose the media-friendly, controversy free route of doing nothing, taking no stances, and offering Canadians no real change at all. Why? Because it's more in keeping with the media's values. Not because it's what Canadians want, but because the media would bash Layton and the NDP for offering a different approach...or worse yet, deem them irrelevant and ignore them altogether as it does the Green Party.

Long story short: if you want truth, you need to start looking for it yourself, because the media isn't going to report on the truth if it's uninteresting, or at least if they do, they'll report on all of the nonsense first. Let's not let ourselves be Swift-boated by the media and by our political parties.

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