Real Stories Behind The Healthcare Debate

Amanda McGowan, Editor

Change—it has been a common word in the news over the past year or so, stemming from the election of President Barack Obama. So, it's no surprise that amidst the current healthcare debate, the word "change"—and the extent to which it's necessary for our current healthcare system—is once again being used.

A few days ago, I came upon an article discussing a video called "Begging For Change," posted on YouTube by Maine's Service Employees Union. The video, advocating government-run healthcare, shows fundraising efforts for people struggling with medical bills. Snapshots of signs and posters and photos fade in and out of the video while the "Begging For Change Healthcare Blues" plays in the background (click here to watch the video [1]). The campaign hopes collect as many of these images as possible and present them to the state's members of Congress to advocate for immediate action on healthcare legislation.

According to the article, the "Begging For Change" video is just one of many ways people are telling their stories in relation to the healthcare debate. Videos, ads and Websites galore can be found online on both sides of the argument.

A video posted by Conservatives For Patient's Rights [2] show patients like Katie Brickell, a British Citizen who says the National Health Service denied her a Pap Smear that may have saved her from cervical cancer. Now, she says she likely has just a few years to live. (click here to watch video [3]) Obama's political operation, Organizing for America [4], set up a Web site where people can post their own health care stories and read those of others. Families USA [5] has housed a story bank since before President Bill Clinton's 1993 attempt to restructure the healthcare system, the article reports.

The virtually limitless communication capabilities of the Internet and technological options like video undoubtedly make the healthcare debate more complicated. Anybody who wants to have a voice can, and listening to personal stories can have a profound sentimental effect.

Politics aside, I can't help but question: how much should these real-life stories be

considered in the decision about the route our country goes with its healthcare system?

According to health economist Devon Harrick, quoted in the article about “Begging For Change,” utilization of real-life anecdotes is a “distraction” from this tough debate and the questions of policy. How to realistically finance an expansion of heath coverage gets lost in the emotion of the stories.

Yet, some the stories told on these videos are heartbreaking. There are patients who owe hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical bills due to an accident or necessary procedure and are without an available option for affordable healthcare.

I agree that hearing the personal struggles of Americans is important in considering changes to the healthcare system, but it cannot be the only tactic used to argue for or against Obama’s overhaul.

As surgical professionals, you undoubtedly face patients with troubling personal stories on a regular basis—someone who has a necessary surgery, even though it will put them $150,000 deep in medical bills. If you could, you might like to help them in any way possible, even beyond taking care of them during surgery. However, how feasible is it, really, to be able to help everyone in terms of health coverage? And, will an attempt to do that lower the quality of healthcare for all, and is that a risk we should take?

These are some of the questions being asked in this complex healthcare debate. To come to a solution, we need to be able to decipher between an emotional personal story and the reality of the situation, as well as be able to balance the two, in making an informed decision about the changes that could affect all of our futures.

What's your take? Email amanda.mcgowan@advantagemedia.com [6]

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