

# Book Reviews

***Understanding Healthcare: a historical perspective***, by Kenneth A. Fisher, 160 pp, softcover, \$14.95, ISBN-13: 978-0997151121, Freedom in Health Care, 2017.

It wasn't until I had entered private practice that I began to think seriously about health policy and economics.

As an endocrinologist who treated primarily diabetic patients, I had come up with an idea to increase efficiency. Since much of the appointment time involved covering diabetic material that was repetitive, instead of treating one patient at a time for an hour each time, why not bring 10 together at a time for one hour? That would result in 10 hours' work being done in one hour and save me a whole nine-hour day of work.

But because medical care is "different," I quickly learned that it was illegal to bill Medicare, Medicaid, or health insurances for such visits, and that most patients were not willing to pay for them. The prevailing patient attitude was that medical care should be free, and that if it was not free, then someone other than the patient should pay for it.

How could this be?

Was it because medical care was so critically necessary? But aren't food, clothing, shelter, and police/military protection even more necessary? Or was it because it was a right? Or a privilege? Or neither of these, but rather a need? And as with other needs, shouldn't we be able to go into the marketplace and choose the care that we need without a third party telling us what was permitted and not permitted? How did this come about? How did we get to where we are today?

Some of the answers can be found in this excellent book by Kenneth Fisher, M.D. He begins with a review of the history of modern medicine, and then moves on to examine today's health policies.

By expertly peeling back the onion one layer at a time, he reveals the very many ways that government intervention in the medical marketplace has resulted in an incredibly convoluted and distorted system. In illuminating them, he makes the complex simple.

Dr. Fisher clearly did a lot of research so that we don't have to. He identifies the interventions, many of which we have forgotten, never heard of, or now just take for granted. How could any market interfered with in so many ways function at all?

In a very understandable way, he describes how it is impossible to determine value in a price-fixed system that "ignores demand, expertise, experience and skills." He explains how the patient-doctor relationship has been eviscerated and our liberty, our "freedom to choose," has been crushed.

I suggest that in future editions of this book, the section on the establishment of Medicare, because of its importance, be expanded to include how President Lyndon Johnson tasked Arkansas Rep. Wilbur Mills to shepherd legislation through Congress in order to establish a massive government system.<sup>1</sup>

For more than 50 years, others had tried unsuccessfully. In order to accomplish this, Mills initiated various rules and procedures that would block any input by the public, including those expert in economics, government policies and budgets, and health insurance, as well as physicians. He did not want their input for fear that they would derail the legislation.

Mills also demanded that no open public hearings be held. Instead, the legislators met in closed executive sessions in order that the public not know what was going on and potentially be able to block it. Then, through a number of parliamentary maneuvers, he rammed Medicare through Congress.<sup>1</sup> Mills's poor judgment in doing this is now apparent. In 1965, with the stroke of President Lyndon Johnson's pen, the government became the largest single purchaser of medical care. Now, Medicare is one of the biggest causes of our massive government debt.

We all agree that Medicare is broken. But after attempting since 1965 to fix it, to no avail, can we also now agree that it cannot be fixed...ever? After all, if it were fixable, don't you think that someone by now, after 56 years of trying, would have come up with a solution? No surprise.

After all, Medicare is based on socialism, an unfixable economic system, which has never worked in any country at any time, ever.

One night in 1974, Rep. Mills's poor judgment was once again on display in Washington, D.C., when the Capitol police found him with Argentine-American stripper Fanne Foxe, dancing in a water fountain. Some reports indicate that they were nude. At the time he was not a sophomore in college, but a 65-year-old senior citizen and member of the U.S. House of Representatives. In fact, until this event he had been chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee since 1958. Unfortunately, due to his poor judgment we all continue to suffer under the system that he created many years ago.

Is "healthcare" different?

Yes, because of the government. For example, "Obamacare," approximately 2,700 pages long, generated 13,000 pages of regulations by 2013 alone, and who knows how many since. This was on top of more than 100,000 pages of healthcare regulations already in the Federal Register. History has shown that as each government regulation attempts to correct one problem, it inevitably spawns many more.

What to do?

For a North Star guide, I suggest that we view all health-related legislation in light of the following question: Does the legislation decrease the role of government in medicine? If YES, support it. If NO, work against it.

What else to do?

Read Dr. Fisher's book and get educated on this issue.

Remember, as Groucho Marx once said: "Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies."

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1. Twilight C. Medicare's origin: the economics and politics of dependency. *Cato J* 1997;16(3). Available at: <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/1997/1/cj16n3-3.pdf>. Accessed May 1, 2021.