

## **Ethical Issues: Historic Times**

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11-20-08

The times they are a changing and we are living in historic times. With two seemingly endless wars, an economic down turn not suffered since the Great Depression, and a health care system in deep crisis, our country is challenged like never before. President-elect Obama, our first African American President, will be stepping into an Oval Office on January 20, 2009 that already strains with demands that its occupant find sustainable solutions and gain stability for our country. Equally important is that our new president inspires confidence that we will weather this storm without sacrificing those most vulnerable, like the nearly 46 million without health insurance and another 25 million underinsured in our country. With this burgeoning crisis leadership must sustain an unflinching sense of priority and purpose to address the many issues at hand, but of those nothing looms greater than health care reform. Reforming our health care system will be essential to restoring America's health, economy, and confidence in the sum and substance of who we are as a country.

It's already happening at the national level. Recently Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont) released a white paper ("Call to Action, Health Reform 2009") containing the new administration's plan for health care reform.<sup>1</sup> The goals outlined in this paper set a historic trajectory for ultimately achieving universal access to health care in our country. Among them is providing access to affordable health insurance for everyone. Means to doing this include tax credits and subsidies for low-income persons, purchasing pools based on the Federal Employees Health Benefit Plan (FEHBP), insurance reform, and a requirement that large employers either offer coverage for employees or pay into a system that will allow them to purchase affordable insurance coverage.

The Obama plan also strongly supports primary care, which is in crisis in the United States.<sup>2</sup> His reform plan contains measures that strengthen seniors' access to primary care by enhancing Medicare payment for primary care services and further expanding the patient centered medical home (PCMH) concept, envisioned and long purported by many as being the future of primary care in this country.<sup>3 4</sup> The reform plan also replaces the system that calculates updates to the Medicare physician fee schedule, presently based on a seriously flawed sustainable growth rate (SGR) formula that calls for the annual physician pay cuts. Thus far these annual cuts have been successfully thwarted each year, preventing even greater lags in physician reimbursement that continue to negatively impact the availability of primary care, especially to elderly Americans. This step alone will go a long way to protecting the health and welfare of seniors and to encouraging the future of primary care.

I have made the claim previously that the moral context of healthcare is the universal need for healthcare services that at some point everyone experiences before they die. By definition, therefore, health care is not a commodity but a means to meeting a basic human need. On the other hand, this does not mean that society should provide everything for everybody when demanded. A balanced view will be necessary to ensure fair and prudent distribution of our often scarce health care resources. Fiscal responsibility will admittedly be important to any reform package that moves toward

universal access. Constructive economic adjustments should also consider provisions that improve quality, enhance prevention, and encourage personal responsibility for one's own health and health care. Providers, organizations and society, must in the end find ways to provide access to everyone by aligning incentives with quality and personal responsibility. Our country will be taking a huge step in meeting the challenges of its dysfunctional healthcare system by enacting a reform package that moves toward universal access. Much remains to be done, however, and a bipartisan effort will be needed in the months and years to come if we are to effectively enable access to adequate and equitable healthcare for everyone.

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<sup>1</sup>Bacus M. Call to Action Health Reform 2009. <http://finance.senate.gov/healthreform2009/home.html>

<sup>2</sup> Moore G and Showstack J. Primary Care Medicine in Crisis: Toward Reconstruction and Renewal. *Ann Int Med.* 2003;138(3):244-247

<sup>3</sup> Davis K, Schoenbaum S, and Audet A. A 2020 Vision of Patient-Centered Primary Care. *JGIM.* 2005;20(10):953-957

<sup>4</sup> Barr M and Ginsburg J. The Advanced Medical Home: A Patient-Centered, Physician-Guided Model of Health Care. A Policy Monograph of the American College of Physicians. 2006  
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