

American Health Care: Keeping What's Best

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Big change is coming again to American health care. President-elect Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress have been clear about their intent to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. Yet, it is too early to know the specifics of replacement and the timeframe for implementation. In considering these next steps, it is important to understand both the good and the bad of the American health care system so that the coming changes actually improve the health of Americans.

For all the resources dedicated to health care, much of America's public health system is inadequate. Measures of public health place America near the bottom of industrialized nations. Life expectancy is lower than most other developed nations, while infant mortality is higher. Rates of obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases are unacceptably high. Many health care providers believe we are moving inexorably toward a commoditized health care system with mega-health systems and insurance companies with narrow provider networks, and less and less time for physicians and health providers to actually **listen** to patients. And, we continue to face high-cost delivery and ever-increasing costs of medicines.

There are positive elements of the Affordable Care Act that contribute to public health and have been recognized by the incoming administration. Preventing insurers from denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions, allowing parents to cover children under their own plans until the age of 26 and substantially decreasing the number of uninsured (through Medicaid and the Exchanges) are all positive policies. We also believe that including certain preventive care free of charge ensures that millions will avoid diseases they might otherwise suffer. Expanding

programs for the leading causes of preventable, premature death in America, such as smoking cessation and obesity, are important. Similarly, newly focused quality programs to improve outcomes and value in health care and to decrease error rates in hospitals have been encouraging and should accelerate going forward.

In contrast to America's record in public health, there is **no better place in the world to be treated for serious diseases** such as cancer, complicated respiratory and cardiac illnesses and others. America is an unparalleled incubator of innovation and transformative change in medicine and science. American companies and the physicians and scientists who drive them serve as astoundingly productive sources of new discoveries,

treatments and technologies that improve medical care for people around the world (if we can fund research consistently and adequately). The 21st Century

Cures Act, now making its way through Congress, should enhance the funding and support for some of these initiatives. Realizing the promise of precision medicine, with proactive care customized to individual biology and circumstances, depends on continued innovation that will substantially improve outcomes and decrease costs.

As the president-elect and Congress plan and execute changes in health care policies and programs, those of us on the front lines are truly hoping for **bipartisan** solutions, so reversals are not repeated with every election cycle. If we keep in mind that the American health care system offers extraordinary strengths in innovation in medicine and science, which translate to health care delivery, we are convinced that we can continue to improve health for all Americans in a cost-effective manner.

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*One in a series of commentaries by leading physicians and researchers at **National Jewish Health** in Denver, Colorado. National Jewish Health is also in New York City at the **Mount Sinai – National Jewish Health Respiratory Institute.***