

Point of View

Poor health care a threat to U.S. security

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Americans aren't getting what we pay for in health care, and it's endangering not just our lives, but our nation's security.

Federal expenditures in America on health care and defense are nearly equal. Health care spending by the federal government is roughly \$642 billion, compared to \$651 billion for defense. Each category represents approximately 24 percent of federal spending, and together represent nearly half of the entire federal budget.

Defense spending has given Americans the security of knowing that they unquestionably have the best military in the world -- ever. A nagging question, though, is whether our national security is threatened by a health care system with a failing return on comparable investments.

As commander of the First Army, I prepared 430,000 soldiers for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of the soldiers from the National Guard and Reserves were not deployable because of health issues ranging from diabetes to serious heart disease. Most did not know they were ill before taking our routine blood tests. In fact, only three in 10 young men and women in our country are physically fit to serve in our military due to health problems such as obesity, asthma, lower joint issues, heart disease, dental problems and diabetes.

Clearly, some of the problems stem from a poorly designed health care system where many people fall through the cracks. Approximately 46 million Americans lack health insurance. Even when insured, plans are predominantly designed around a sick-care model and less on prevention.

When I was a boy, I spent 14 days at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. My father took me to its well-known trauma unit after I was hit by a bat during a backyard baseball game. We were very poor and had no health insurance, and the doctors there saved my life.

The uninsured are often members of families that work. The working poor are more likely to experience financial hardships caused by inadequate insurance coverage. My father taught me that to work is truly a blessing. However, to work, have insurance and still be driven into financial ruin is a disgraceful American tragedy.

Comprehensive health care reform to rectify this situation is needed, now.

The U.S. health care system is the most expensive in the world, but when compared to other industrialized nations, we rank dead last in health outcomes. Why do Americans tolerate this situation? Our badly designed system harms the health of Americans from cradle to grave. Infant

mortality rates in America are higher than in Cuba and, astonishingly, in some American communities, babies die before the age of one at rates greater than in Vietnam.

We most vividly see the future national security threat posed to America when we look at obesity and related cardiovascular disease rates. One third of all Americans are obese. Childhood obesity, and related complications such as diabetes, are already at terribly high levels, and are growing.

The economic and societal burdens created by this situation are staggering. They have a direct negative impact on military and emergency preparedness and response. People in poor health are less likely to meet military entrance requirements, sustain long tenures of military service, or build military careers ending in retirement. People in poor health are more likely to require medical care and special assistance during disasters.

I witnessed these problems during the Katrina response, where the sick, frail, and immobile required more attention from responders and family members, hampering the response to the disaster.

A physically unfit and chronically sick population cannot provide the human resources needed to sustain a strong military in the future. Health care in America is a clear threat to national safety and security. Comprehensive health care reform -- where every American has an opportunity for a longer and healthier life -- is needed. Our national safety and security depend on it.

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