

Health: a fight for rights

By MARGARET FLOWERS

Health care must become the civil rights movement of our time. And it is becoming clear that achieving guaranteed health care for every American will require all the tools that helped win earlier civil rights fights.

Earlier this month, eight health care advocates, including me and two other Maryland physicians, stood up to Sen. Max Baucus, Democrat of Montana, and the Senate Finance Committee during a "public roundtable discussion" with a simple question: Will you allow an advocate for a single-payer national health plan to have a seat at the table? The answer was a loud, "Get more police!"

Single-payer is a system of public financing that will guarantee everyone, without exception, all medically necessary care with no co-pays or deductibles. You would go to the doctor (most of whom would remain in private practice) and hospital of your choice.

By replacing today's wasteful, fragmented, for-profit private health insurance industry with a single, streamlined system of paying medical bills, similar to how traditional Medicare works, we would save more than \$400 billion annually, enough to assure comprehensive, quality care to all.

Single payer is supported by the majority of the public, as well as most doctors and nurses. It would end the tens of thousands of preventable deaths and more than 1 million cases of medical bankruptcy that occur in the United States every year. But none of that seems to matter to Mr. Baucus.

As the May 5 meeting approached, we applied the standard tools of advocacy, organizing call-in days and faxes to committee members, requesting the presence of one single-payer advocate at the table of 15. The only reply - received on the day before the event - was, "Sorry, but no more invitations will be issued."

The next day, we donned our suits and traveled to Washington. As the meeting started, one of us,

Russell Mokhiber, stood up to say that we were here and we were ready to take a seat. He was promptly removed from the room. I stood up next and spoke out for single payer. I was also arrested, as were the six others who spoke out in turn.

In that moment, it became clear: We could write letters, call staffers, and fax until the machines fell apart, but the Senate Finance Committee had no intention of allowing single-payer experts to have a voice in the process.

Instead, the people seated at the table represented the corporate interests: private health insurers, big business and those who support their agenda. These same players paid more than \$13 million to the members of the Finance Committee in the 2008 election cycle alone. They profit greatly from the current arrangements and do not want changes that will hurt their pocketbooks.

For decades, doctors and nurses have tried to deliver quality health care in an environment that makes it increasingly difficult to do so. We all have stories that break our hearts. The time has come to tell our stories so that we can create a health care system that focuses on care, not corporate profit.

And so, we have entered a new phase in the movement for health care as a human right: acts of nonviolent, civil disobedience. At the most recent roundtable in the Senate Finance Committee, on Tuesday, 30 nurses silently stood up and turned their backs to the committee with the message: "Nurses say: Patients first. No to AHIP [America's Health Insurance Plans]. Pass single payer." After a few minutes they walked out. Then five more people were arrested as they spoke out for single payer.

The opportunity to make health care a civil rights issue is here. If calling our legislators isn't enough to get the job done, we must use the tools that have achieved civil rights victories in the past.

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