

# **PNHP Board & Activist Conference Call**

May 26, 2016, 8 p.m. Central time

Present: approximately 35 callers including Mark Almberg (PNHP staff, IL), Thomas Clairmont, MD (NH), Andrew Coates, MD (NY), Bill Davidson, MD (PA), Claudia Fegan, MD, Oliver Fein, MD (NY), Harvey Fernbach, MD (MD), Adam Gaffney, MD (MA), Dixon Galvez-Searle (PNHP staff, IL), Pamella Gronemeyer, MD (IL), Ida Hellander, MD (PNHP staff, IL), David Himmelstein, MD (NY), Henry Kahn, MD (GA), Stephen Kemble, MD (HI), Marc Lavietes, MD (NY), Don Mitchell, MD (WA), Jim Mitchiner, MD (MI), Matthew Petty (PNHP staff, IL), Anne Scheetz, MD (IL), Gordon Schiff, MD (MA), Eve Shapiro, MD (AZ), Adam Sorscher, MD (NH), Kelly Thibert, DO (president, AMSA), Kay Tillow (KY), Howard Waitzkin, MD (NM), and Steffie Woolhandler, MD (NY).

The call was moderated by Dr. Andrew Coates, who welcomed all participants to the discussion.

## **1. Physicians' Proposal released May 5**

*A report by Dr. Adam Gaffney*

Dr. Gaffney reported on the unveiling of “Beyond the Affordable Care Act: A Physicians’ Proposal for Single-Payer Health Care Reform” in an editorial in the American Journal of Public Health and at a simultaneous news conference at the National Press Club on May 5. He said the release of the materials generated impressive media coverage for the Proposal and single payer, including in The Washington Post, The Hill, US News & World Report and many other national and local outlets, that the launch gave rise to several radio interviews, some TV exposure, and the publication of several outstanding op-eds by PNHP members (including one by Karen Palmer in British Columbia that has been republished in a half-dozen or more outlets in Canada). He added that the Proposal, now that it’s public, continues to offer great opportunities to insert single payer into the national debate, to obtain new individual and group endorsements, and to build PNHP.

Among the discussants was Kay Tillow, who described how physicians, medical students and single-payer activists in Louisville, Ky., held a news conference in the middle of the campus of the University of Louisville School of Medicine and got press coverage from the Courier-Journal, Business First, and the Greater Louisville Medical Society magazine.

Dr. Oliver Fein reported on the New York Metro news conference on May 6, which, while not drawing reporters, led to the production of an outstanding video of the proceedings, featuring physicians, medical students and union activists on why they support the Proposal.

## **2. Attacks on single payer’s financial viability**

*A report by Dr. Steffie Woolhandler*

Dr. Woolhandler reviewed recent claims – particularly those by Kenneth Thorpe and by the Urban Institute, which were covered by the Washington Post, the New York Times, and other leading outlets – that single payer would be prohibitively expensive and fiscally irresponsible. She cited the many studies (by the CBO, GAO, private firms) showing that a single-payer system

would cover everyone for all medically necessary care and not increase health spending, and that it would save money over the long term. She analyzed the key (and very similar) arguments of Thorpe and the Urban Institute and described how they can be effectively refuted. (A concise summary of these refutations are contained in a series of articles by her and Dr. Himmelstein at The Huffington Post and The Hill.) She said that some of our push-back to the Washington Post and the New York Times may be having a good impact on those publications; their editors seem to be showing a greater willingness to hear and publish our point of view.

Dr. Himmelstein gave some examples of absurd claims about the alleged lack of savings under a single payer. As an aside, he also pointed to a recent Gallup poll showing 58 percent of the public, including 41 percent of Republicans, support a federally funded health program.

### **3. Dr. Howard Waitzkin on ‘Doctor-Workers: United!’ and physician disobedience**

Dr. Waitzkin described his recent article at Medscape titled “Doctor-Workers: Unite! Could Disobedience Be the Path Ahead?” which chronicles his personal experiences in challenging his employer’s dictate about mandatory training for the new ICD-10, his refusal to comply, his punishment, and the eventual resolution of the episode. (His full account is on PNHP’s website.) He put this in the context of the changing class position of physicians in the U.S., and the inroads that large, for-profit corporations are making in the control of doctors and other providers in the health care system – inroads that are leading to loss of autonomy and a higher rate of physician frustration and burnout.

He raised additional questions – which he elaborates upon in a recent article with Dr. Ida Hellander in Monthly Review titled “Obamacare: The Neoliberal Model Comes Home to Roost in the United States—If We Let It” – about how the transformation in U.S. medicine suggests that while single-payer national health insurance is a worthy goal, it will likely be insufficient to remedy the health care system due to the harmful role of other profit-obsessed players in health care.

This led to a lively discussion that touched on electronic health records, doctor burnout, and the corrosion of Medicare’s public character by private interests, among other things. Dr. Coates noted that the discussion obviously hit a chord, and said there may be a way to continue the discussion on subsequent conference calls.

### **4. Chapter reports**

**New York Metro.** Dr. Marc Lavietes reported on the chapter’s most recent public forum, which featured the remarks of Kamini Doobay, a fourth-year medical student, and other members of the NYC Coalition to Dismantle Racism in the Health System. He also briefly reported on the May 24 Lobby Day in Albany in support of the New York Health Act. While the New York Assembly has passed the measure, the legislation faces an uphill battle in the state Senate. It needs 32 votes to pass in the Senate; at the moment it has 22 co-sponsors there and four others say they’ll vote for it if it comes to the floor. So it will be challenge to pass it in the Senate this year.

**Illinois.** Dr. Anne Scheetz reported that the resolution passed in February by the Chicago Medical Society to study single payer, which was also forwarded on to the Illinois State Medical Society and the AMA, has now passed the ISMS. She then focused on student activity, including an article in Chicago Medicine by medical student Anna Zelivianskaia about how students can advance goals such as single payer through resolutions. Dr. Scheetz said Illinois now has six student chapters out of seven medical schools in the Chicago metro area, a big advance over just a few years ago; how, of those, Loyola students who are also members of the Latino Medical Student Association, joined the May Day march for immigrants; and how students have been presenting posters and talks about single payer in the Chicago area.

**Special comment by AMSA president.** Dr. Kelly Thibert, the president of the American Medical Student Association, said that AMSA is committed to the principle of health care for all; that it will be aggressively promoting single payer in the year ahead; that medical student Jim Curry will be heading much of this campaign, with special emphasis during national primary care week; and that a forthcoming retreat of AMSA's leadership would take single payer up as a priority issue. She said that AMSA's leadership is looking forward to collaborating with PNHP in many ways going forward. (Dr. Coates replied that PNHP cherishes its relationship with AMSA and looks forward to working with it this year.)

## **5. Announcements**

Dr. Claudia Fegan announced that a wonderful, heartwarming memorial to Dr. Quentin Young was held in Chicago on May 22. The gathering drew an estimated 700 people, including Quentin's family. The plan is to collect the various remarks that were made there to make them more widely accessible.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:01 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Mark Almberg