

Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich
Committee on Education and Labor
Opening Statement for Mark-up on
“America’s Affordable Health Choices Act”
July 15, 2009

Medicine in the U.S. is a profit driven market commodity distributed according to the ability to pay rather than a basic human right distributed as a public service according to medical need. No wonder that the United States ranks 47th in life expectancy and 23rd in infant mortality. In this profit driven, private insurance based system there are over 1400 managed care organizations and 5000 health insurance plans. We have the most expensive health care system in the world – over 16% of our GDP. Two point four trillion dollars a year goes to health spending and 1 out of every 3 dollars go to the activities of the for-profit system- for corporate profits, stock options, executive salaries, advertising, marketing, and the cost of paperwork. Yet 47 million people remain uninsured and another 50 million are underinsured. I submit that there is a direct relationship between the for-profit health care system and the uninsured and the underinsured.

We can no longer look the other way as the uninsured and underinsured continue to grow their ranks. We cannot ignore the growing share of all bankruptcies that is attributable to medical bills – now over 60%. We can no longer live with a system that is, by most indications, among the lowest quality in the developed world. And we can’t afford the rising costs.

Indeed, rising costs are the essence of the problem. Health care stakeholders are sinking more and more money into efforts designed to make someone else pay the bill. It is profitable to do so. Insurance companies, doctors, hospitals and patients are all fighting over who pays. But the insurance companies are winning while they focus on the stock market value, on their financial profits, on their investments in tobacco, on their strategies to restrict or deny service – which increases their profit.

They have set up massive, redundant and highly profitable bureaucracies that deny care. When we buy their services, we don’t just pay for their infrastructure’ we also pay for a second infrastructure which results in doctors having to hire more staff to fight with insurance companies just to protect themselves.

Consider that the growth in the number of professionals who actually deliver health care since the 1970s is under 300%. But the increase in the administrators- those who do not deliver care – is upwards of 2400%. The insurance companies have wedged themselves between the doctor and the patient. It is easy to see why our costs have spiraled out of control and the health insurance industry is consistently shown in polls to be one of the least trusted industries in America.

There are many models of health care reform from which to choose around the world – the vast majority of which perform far better than ours. The one that has been the most tested here and abroad is single payer. Under a single payer system everyone in the U.S.

would get a card that would allow access to any doctor at virtually any hospital. Doctors and hospitals would continue to be privately run, but the insurance payments would be in the public hands.

By getting rid of the for-profit insurance companies, we can save \$400 billion per year and provide coverage for all medically necessary services for everyone in the U.S. It would cost no more than we are currently paying for health care. This is the consistent conclusion in reports by the Government Accountability Office, the Congressional Budget Office, and several independent analyst organizations like the Lewin Group.

Cost is just one of the reasons that support for single payer is growing so quickly. HR 676, The United States National Health Care Act, now boasts 85 cosponsors. It has been endorsed by over 550 union organizations, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the League of Women Voters, Consumer's Union and deans of prominent medical schools. 59% of doctors support it, as do 60% of Americans.

The bill we are considering today, I regret to say, is not a single payer bill. It further entrenches the existing for-profit, insurance-based system by handing even more money over to the insurance industry. It will leave 17 million Americans uninsured. It is silent on the great state experimentation, at the state level, with single payer.

Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago once wrote, "Health care is an essential safeguard of human life and dignity and it is an obligation of society to ensure that every person has the opportunity to realize that right." We can do better than protecting an insurance based, for-profit system that will continue to exclude millions of Americans.