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Real Money: Run over by health care reform

By Rob Rikoon | For The New Mexican

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While Congress beats its (I believe it's a) drum, imagine I got hit by a car on the way to the July 4th parade. Wanting nothing but the best care, since I needed that knee for a 100-mile endurance race next weekend in Colorado, I tried checking into the hospital but was turned away by a para-administrator who said my insurance card wasn't acceptable to their computer. A doctor friend of mine sauntered by on his cell phone, waved, but dared not interrupt his lawyer's train of thought.

An Internet search turned up no information or ratings of who to use, what was reasonable to do, or where to go, so I stayed put. They finally did let me into the ER and ordered an MRI, CT scan, blood work and psychiatric exam. Gee whiz, all I wanted was to be patched up and sent back to the Winsor Trail.

We spend as much on medical care every year as we do bailing out the banks, and are told we have the best quality health services in the world but it ain't so. They say 30 cents of every dollar goes to some middleman somewhere in the Midwest. We may have the best machines and smartest doctors, but every time I interact with them, I feel like I have been robbed. Two-thirds of Americans are fed up with the current system. Four out of five people who have medical and dental coverage say they would refuse to pay more so that the uninsured Americans could obtain health care.

In Miami, it costs three times as much for the same services as in Oregon. Massa(taxa)chusetts is headed to bankruptcy because it tried setting up its own universal health care. We could — and maybe should, in part — blame greedy malpractice lawyers, price-gouging drug companies, inefficient hospitals and anonymous insurance companies but in the end, we have to figure out what we want as a society.

No matter what tweaks are made to get more folks covered (one in six are not), the current private health care system doesn't cut it. About a third of medical costs in the U.S. are spent on the last year of life, much of it in the final months on heroic measures. Are we willing to let our loved ones or ourselves die a few weeks or months earlier than is made possible by medical technology?

If we are to succeed in reforming health care, I see doctors of the future working hard, knowing their salaries will be moderate. Corporate lobbying by drug, insurance and medical professional groups will be banned. Consumers of health care will have access to as much information and choice as we do when going to buy a new car.

The time frame for a knee to repair is about a month, but mostly I chafe at the expense and ignominy of it all. Woe be to all of us as we baby boomers kvetch our way into old age.

The ER waiting room will definitely need a lot more soundproofing.

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