

# **The True Workings of Single Payer Health Systems: Lessons or Warnings for U.S. Reform**

**Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and  
Academic Health Center, University of Minnesota and  
*Journal of Health Policy, Politics and Law***

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A single payer health care system stands out among the reform options preferred by progressives and the worst case scenarios deplored by conservatives. In this intense, entrenched debate, advocates of single payer laud its potential to ensure access and control costs, while critics deride it as the epitome of socialized medicine, bound to damage the quality of care, impair access by means of rationing, and subject health care to vast governmental control and endless meddling.

What, however, do these policy combatants mean by single payer? How well do prevailing images fit the realities of present-day single payer health care systems? Unfortunately, far more energy has been expended on abstract (and misleading) rhetorical jousting than on careful definition and delineation of the practical features of the systems in question.

The prevailing polemical images of single payer systems convey a homogeneous and monotone picture that slights the complexities of systems such as the Canadian and those found in Europe. Such oversimplifications both inflate the advocates' expectations that a refreshingly efficient uniformity can replace America's lamentably chaotic "non-system" and inflame the opponents' high anxieties over systems that in fact embody considerable pluralism and variation and are more compatible with American culture and institutional patterns than is often supposed. In short, the single payer debate has become a drag on health reform deliberations because we (interlocutors in the national conversation) simply do not know what we are talking about.

The University of Minnesota and the *Journal of Health Policy, Politics and Law* is hosting a conference, which will be published in a forthcoming volume that will bring together leading experts and policy makers to investigate and debate the true workings of single payer systems and their implications for health policy debates in the United States.

## CONFERENCE AGENDA

### Friday May 9, 2008

**11:00am: Registration**  
light lunch served

**12:00pm: Welcome**  
J. Brian Atwood, Dean, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

Lawrence R. Jacobs, Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance, University of Minnesota

**Introduction: Moving Forward**  
Representative, Academic Health Center, University of Minnesota

### Overview

**12:30pm: What is Single Payer? Identifying the Countries, Features, and Performance**  
Adam Oliver, RCUK Academic Fellow in Health Economics and Policy, London School of Economics

Discussants  
Deborah Stone, Visiting and Research Professor, Dartmouth College

Steve Parente, Associate Professor, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota

Moderator  
Lawrence R. Jacobs, Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance, University of Minnesota

**1:45pm: Break**

### Single Payer Financing

**2:00pm: The Diversity of Funding**  
Sherry Glied, Department Chair, Health Policy and Management and Professor of Health Policy and Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

From where and whom does the money for the health system come? What types of taxes, premiums, or other contributions are extracted from what sources (central government, provinces, corporations, individual taxpayers, and so on)? Does the absence of multiple payers (sickness funds, insurance firms) imply less capacity to tap multiple sources of funds for the system? How would these arrangements map onto the American system?

Discussants

James Morone, Professor of Political Science and Urban Studies, Brown University

Jon Christianson, Professor and James A. Hamilton Chair in Health Policy and Management, University of Minnesota

Moderator

Michael Sparer, Director, Executive MPH Program, Professor of Health Policy and Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

**3:30pm: Break**

**4:00pm: How Singular is Reimbursement?**

Jon Christianson, Professor and James A. Hamilton Chair in Health Policy and Management, University of Minnesota

How diverse are payment arrangements across categories of providers? Are payment arrangements similar within categories of providers? For instance, are all physicians paid according to the same fee schedule and all hospitals paid according to same formula? Are there uniform rules guiding reimbursement of non-physician outpatient providers paid? How would these arrangements map onto the American system?

Discussants

Jeffrey S. Schiff, M.D., Medical Director, Minnesota Department of Human Services

Theodore Marmor, Professor Emeritus of Public Policy and Management & Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Yale University

Moderator

Lawrence D. Brown, Professor of Public Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

**5:30pm: Break**

**Dinner and Public Forum**

**6:00pm: State Reform: Hopeful Laboratories or Sand Traps?**

Senator Linda Berglin, Minnesota Senate

Representative Thomas Huntley, Minnesota House of Representatives

Moderator

Michael Sparer, Director, Executive MPH Program, Professor of Health Policy and Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

**Saturday May 10, 2008**

**8:30am: Continental Breakfast**

## **Institutional Design**

### **9:00am: Governing in a System of Federalism and Separated Powers**

Carolyn Tuohy, Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto

How are the uniform principles promulgated by the central government adjusted in practice to diverse preferences, conditions, and institutional capacities in sub-national governments? How is the sharing of funds between the central and sub-national governments determined? How and why has it changed over time? How would these arrangements map onto the American system?

#### Discussants

Mark Peterson, Professor of Public Policy and Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles

Scott Greer, Assistant Professor, School of Public Health, University of Michigan

Scott Abernathy, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Minnesota

#### Moderator

Michael Sparer, Director, Executive MPH Program, Professor of Health Policy and Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

### **10:15am: Break**

## **Preserving Income and Autonomy: Health Care Providers**

### **10:30am: Physicians – The Continuing Search for Autonomy and Pay**

Robert Berenson, M.D., Senior Fellow, Urban Institute

### **Hospitals – The Challenges in Changing Environment**

Bruce Rueben, President, Minnesota Hospital Association

What are the key issues for health care providers in single-payer systems? Are providers able to preserve clinical autonomy and high incomes? What is the mix between primary care providers and specialists? What is the relationship between physicians and hospitals? What is the political process through which providers bargain for budgets and income? How do different groups of providers fare in the political bargaining? Are these players relatively content with their roles or do they clamor for reform? What lessons are suggested for US policymakers?

#### Discussants

Lawrence D. Brown, Professor of Public Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University (moderator)

James Hart, M.D., Director, Executive Program in Public Health Practice University of Minnesota School of Public Health

### **12:00 pm: Luncheon Keynote**

James Morone, Professor of Political Science and Urban Studies, Brown University

Moderator

Lawrence R. Jacobs, Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance,  
University of Minnesota

**1:30pm: Life After Death: A Continuing Role for Insurers?**

Joe White, Department Chair, Luxenberg Family Professor of Public Policy, and  
Director of the Center for Policy Studies, Case Western Reserve University

What role, if any, do insurers play in a single payer system? What would mix of  
unity and diversity in a single payer system mean for US insurers? Are there  
reasonable grounds for the fears of insurers that their roles and institutional  
positions would be terminated? Might they find acceptable roles within such a  
system?

Discussants

Colleen Flood, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy and Scientific  
Director, Institute of Health Services and Policy Research, Canadian Institutes of  
Health Research

Moderator

Mark Peterson, Professor of Public Policy and Political Science, University of  
California, Los Angeles

**Controversy or Consensus?**

**2:45pm: Equity and Access**

Lynn Blewett, Associate Professor in the Division of Health Policy and Management,  
School of Public Health, University of Minnesota

Do single payer systems deliver egalitarianism in access and health outcomes? Or,  
does it threaten to lock in or exacerbate inequalities? What is the relative access,  
treatment, and health of underserved populations in a single payer system? Are  
there major conflicts of value and interest in single payer systems between the  
healthy and ill or chronically needy underserved populations? What would the mix  
of unity and diversity in single payer systems mean for US underserved populations?

Discussants

Kip Sullivan, consumer advocate

Colleen Grogan, Associate Professor, School of Social Service Administration,  
University of Chicago

Dr. Scott Davies, Professor of Medicine, University of Minnesota, Chief of Medicine,  
Hennepin County Medical Center

Moderator

Michael Sparer, Director, Executive MPH Program, Professor of Health Policy and  
Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

**4:00pm: Break**

**4:15pm: Quality Care and Healthy Populations**

Roger Feldman, Blue Cross Professor of Health Insurance and Professor of Economics, University of Minnesota

What is the connection between quality care and healthy populations? How can the quality of care be defined and studied for cross-national comparisons? Do single payer systems have independent effects on quality care and/or health? How would these arrangements map onto the American system?

Discussants

Michael Gusmano, Assistant Professor of Health Policy and Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

Scott Leitz, Assistant Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Health

Moderator

Lawrence D. Brown, Professor of Public Health, Columbia University

**5:30: Lessons Learned and Hurdles Discovered**

Lawrence D. Brown, Professor of Public Health, Columbia University

Lawrence R. Jacobs, Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance, University of Minnesota

Michael Sparer, Director, Executive MPH Program, Professor of Health Policy and Management, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University