

As I am sure you are all well aware, we have a great debate going on in Washington regarding our health care system. I have written about this before, but I recently read an article that was actually written back in 2000 that has some bearing on this discussion. It was written by a Dr. Barbara Starfield and was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

In the article Dr. Starfield pointed out that although we have the most costly health care system in the world, we don't necessarily have the best. I often hear politicians talk about how we have the best system and the only problem we have is that because of its cost, some people are prevented access to the system. Dr. Starfield might disagree.

When compared to other industrialized nations, the U.S. ranks well below the leaders in a variety of health indicators. Depending on the number of nations that are included in the list, we can rank anywhere from 37<sup>th</sup> on the list to 12<sup>th</sup>. In the latter we were 12 out of 13, so second to last. The type indicators that are included in the measurement of health status include life expectancy and infant mortality.

What Dr. Starfield noted, which I had not heard before, is that our very low ranking is evident even though some of our health habits are actually better than those in countries that scored higher. For instance many of the countries who rank higher than we do in health statistics actually have a higher percentage of their populations who smoke.

We also have a lower cholesterol level than many other "healthier" countries. This parallels an opinion that I and other experts have that cholesterol is not as evil as it has been made out to be by our health care system and pharmaceutical industry.

Dr. Starfield blames the disparity between our poor health statistics and our better health habits on the medical industry itself. She notes that almost a quarter million Americans die each year as a result of medical treatment and not the disease for which they were being treated. Over 100,000 deaths occur as a result of drug side-effects. 80,000 are due to hospital acquired infections. The remainder are due to a combination of errors and unnecessary surgery.

While I agree with Dr. Starfield in many respects, I think there are other factors in play. For instance, most of the people in these healthier countries are more active and tend to eat more whole foods than we do. Americans also take many more medications than people in other countries and often times these medications don't really treat the cause of the problem, so the underlying condition can worsen even though we may feel better temporarily.

All medications also have side effects that in some cases can cause death and add to the statistics that I mentioned earlier, but in most cases they probably just lead to a gradual deterioration of the body that may lead to other diseases or death that is not directly attributed to the drug.

If we are to truly solve our health care crisis we need to look at more than just how to pay for it and deliver it. We need to look at these other issues and develop changes that can actually result in healthier people.