

To Your Health

“You have nothing if you don’t have your health.” How many times have we heard this homely bromide? Yet few clichés ring so true, as anyone can attest who has ever been miserably prostrated by a 24-hour bug, tried futilely to get comfortable with a bad back, or gazed in dismay at a mysterious rash spreading itself across the expanse of his or her torso.

So many of life’s concerns seem to recede in the face of even relatively minor physical discomfort. Even the most pressing can be overwhelmed entirely by chronic illness, intense pain, or the shock of a grim prognosis. What we cling to at such times is the promise of effective treatment and the hope for a complete recovery.

Yet many Americans today doubt that promise and lack that hope. They depend for their health care on a system that some 89% believe needs either fundamental changes or to be completely rebuilt. Over half think the system has major problems, and another 11% say it is in a state of crisis.

At the same time the public thinks the system is ailing and in need of strong medicine, it places little faith in those best positioned to make it well. The politicians’ efforts are deemed by most to be mediocre or worse. The industries that provide or pay for medical needs are adjudged to be among the most insensitive, greedy, and untrustworthy of all industries named.

Behind the dissatisfaction and the blame lies a good deal of concern, helplessness, and perhaps fear. Forty-six percent of Americans worry that they won’t be able to afford health care services they might need over the next year, and 42% are worried about paying for prescription drugs. Of the 10% who could not get needed medical care for themselves or family

members in the past year, three-quarters say it was because they could not afford it. Of the 45% of insured Americans who had seen an increase in their health care costs not covered by insurance, 90% apparently saw no alternative to keeping their current coverage and paying more. Half worry that insurance will become too expensive to afford.

Between 14 and 18% of Americans say they are not currently covered by any form of health insurance. For many of these people, the promise of effective treatment when they need it is a dubious one indeed. Large majorities are extremely or very concerned that they will not be able to afford emergency care, or that the care they get will be of poor quality.

The numbers tell us these things, as well as indicating that the public is split on how to fix the health care system. Who should pay? What should be paid for? What should be the role of the government? Employers? The health care industry itself?

There are no numbers to show us the forehead creased with anxiety over another’s affliction, the child crying out in the night, the poor person dying alone of an untreated, treatable illness. On some level, though, every one of us who has ever lain in or tended a sickbed can surely imagine them without reading the results of a public opinion poll, and understand the fear and the pain.

May you never be caught between the rock of financial insufficiency and the hard place of human suffering.

To your health.

—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Editor

