

The Uninsured...An American Embarrassment

Peyton Stratton is just your average three-year old: she likes “Dora the Explorer,” loves peanut butter and Fluff sandwiches, and is shy around new people. She is also suffering from a rare form of cancer that has grown a tumor on her kidney and metastasized to her lungs. Peyton requires constant hospital care and chemotherapy, and if the tumor can be shrunk to a manageable size, will also require an intense surgery. Yet one of the most challenging aspects of Peyton’s situation is her middle-class Vermont family doesn’t have health insurance, and her family is partially relying on donations from family and community members to make sure this little girl can get the care she needs to go back to being an average kid.

300 miles away in New York City, 20-year-old Yemi Wilson is uninsured and worried about his spine. “I had back surgery when I was 16 because I had severe scoliosis,” he told the New York Times, “They put two titanium bars in to straighten my spine. I’m supposed to see a doctor once or twice a year for that. He’s one of the best doctors in the world and it’s not cheap, so I haven’t seen him since I was 17.” To try to keep himself out of the doctor’s office and out of debt, he is vigilant about practicing yoga to “stay loose” and takes vitamins daily. Yet these simple precautions don’t keep his anxiety about being uninsured at bay. “The danger is the titanium rods won’t hold,” he sighs, “I don’t really know if it has maintained.”

Unfortunately, Peyton and Yemi are just a few examples of a countrywide issue: due to the cost of insurance, many people are voluntarily uninsured, and at risk for not receiving the care they need. As of 2006, over 47 million Americans did not have health insurance of any kind, which equals about 16% of the country’s population; almost 9 million of those are children.

The price tag that comes with health insurance, even for those who get involved in a work-based plan, is often more than an average family can handle. Research has shown that over 40% of families who make \$49,000 or less are uninsured – a statistic that is surprising to many, who imagined uninsured individuals are unemployed. On the contrary, 70% of uninsured families have at least one member working fulltime, confirming that health coverage is not an affordable option to the working class that makes up the backbone of the country. The issues of health care and options for the uninsured or underinsured has dogged the federal government for years, and recently solutions have been attempted up by many states to attack the problem.

The Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured seeks to help individuals and families who fall into these statistics receive the medical care they deserve. Implemented in 1995, the VCCU is a network of nine medical clinics and one dental clinic available to Vermont residents who are uninsured or underinsured and meet salary qualifications. The clinics are free and are supported by local fundraising and donations. The State of Vermont and several other private foundations also contribute to the VCCU initiative. According to an analysis done by Sonja Olson, a VCCU administrator, the clinics in the network currently provide treatment to about 20% of Vermont’s

uninsured or underinsured population. She notes that most of the patients are not only working, but are working multiple jobs, and tend to be between 30-45 years old.

The VCCU is an excellent example of a feasible and realistic solution to the problem of offering solutions and accessibility of treatment to the uninsured. The partial involvement of the Vermont state government should be a model to other states and the federal government to step up for their citizens. However, despite the valiant effort by the VCCU and state government, the steadily increasing cost of health care, transportation and food, as well as the effects of a weakened economy, they need increased support to meet the needs of Vermont's uninsured such as increased Medicaid involvement in the program. Currently, the VCCU is working against the economic odds to try and maintain some level of support for the uninsured, yet as Olson says, "Clients cannot find care in some areas even when services are covered. Clearly, many Vermonters fall through the gaps in private and state programs."

While programs like the VCCU attempt to manage the issue, their efforts are really providing a thin band-aid against the deeper, and more threatening ailment: the need for drastic health care reform on a federal level. As the nation's working class falls victims to a weaker dollar, recession, job cuts, and inflation, the ability of affording insurance slips further away. This reality coupled with the alarming fact that the cost of health care – even basic care – is rising dramatically on a yearly basis leads to only one conclusion: the number of uninsured Americans will continue to rise unless there is dramatic change in Washington, and therefore so will the number of cases like Peyton Stratton and Temi Wilson.

Advocacy groups, like *Cover the Uninsured*, are waging war against this potential future with ferocity and dedication. *Cover the Uninsured* is an organization founded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and is a countrywide initiative to pressure the state and federal governments for realistic and effective solutions to the uninsured crisis. One of their largest goals is to increase coverage for uninsured children. Their web campaign boldly states, "2008 is the year for you to build upon this momentum to increase awareness about the issue, amplify diverse voices on behalf of the uninsured, and demand solutions from our nation's leaders."

The needed solutions do not just address the plight of the uninsured, but of all Americans. Health care in the United States needs to be government regulated, preferably non-profit by primary providers such as hospitals and HMO, and accessible to all without the concern of financial ramifications. *Cover the Uninsured* and the public, with constant voices to their representatives and their votes needs to examine the model the VCCU has established and push for such clinic networks to become mandated in each state. A basic, universal health care policy needs to be more than just advocated, but made a true priority for Washington's politicians, to reverse the trend of less availability of quality medical care for the average, working American, who is the backbone of this country.

Why is this even an issue in the great country of America, when it is not in Canada, France or Great Britain? The conservative right will paint Michael Moore as a flake or villain, but the movie Sicko presents great examples of a healthcare system run amuck in the USA fueled by corporate profits over a moral and ethical code and responsibility for government to care for its citizens. This, my fellow patriot Americans, is a national embarrassment and shame that must be corrected.

