

Westminster health-care show (10/22/09)

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Washington Post: Which country has the best health-care system and why? Can the U.S. follow its model?

"Best health-care system" is like "best in show" at the [Westminster Kennel Club](#). In both cases, biased judges blend dozens of variables, using arbitrary weights, into a single ranking. One bowtied emcee declares, "The French health-care system!" The other proclaims, "The Chihuahua!" The worst dog-show statistic in existence is the World Health Organization's "U.S. is No. 37" -- a number that means nothing but makes Hollywood health mavens bark and howl.

But since you ask ... America has a better claim than any other country to the title "best health-care system." No other country can match our strengths. But we clearly have weaknesses -- some of them very serious. While the rest of the world is a great place to look for ideas, there's no single model we can or should adopt. We have our problems, and they have theirs.

America's health-care costs are high and increasing steadily. These costs are killing business, particularly small business. A responsible American can find himself uninsured and uninsurable (e.g. lose your job and develop a serious medical condition). And, sadly, some American patients suffer and die unnecessarily due to medical errors (as do people in other countries).

We can learn from other countries if we first recognize their problems. Canada has lower costs than America, but their costs are also rising rapidly. In Europe, few go without health insurance, but cancer patients die more quickly than in America. British hospitals have appalling infection rates. European statistics seriously understate infant mortality rates. Ironically, many countries are adopting American-style elements to solve their own problems.

Knowing all this, other countries do offer success stories we might want to emulate. Switzerland and the Netherlands have achieved near-universal coverage through private insurance markets -- no public option needed. Their insurers willingly cover ill people, thanks to risk-adjustment systems. Canada and the United Kingdom have far better medical liability laws than ours. Health savings accounts have seen some success in South Africa and Singapore. France excels at critical care, while India and Thailand bring state-of-the-art managerial techniques to hospitals serving an international clientele.

The challenge for America is to find multinational best practices and graft them onto America's existing infrastructure. That's harder than looking for a single off-the-rack model to adopt, but it's far more productive.

In the end, who cares if the judges cite 57 reasons for choosing the Chihuahua over the Siberian Husky? For that matter, maybe the winner should be a mutt. So it is with health-care systems.