

Tuesday, September 18, 2007

Greeneville Physician Dr. Berry Interviewed On ABC-TV's 20/20

By: *By LISA WARREN/Staff Writer*
Source: *The Greeneville Sun*
09-17-2007

Dr. Robert Berry, a Greeneville family-practice physician, appeared briefly on ABC-TV's 20/20 program Friday evening.

The program was titled "Sick in America: Whose Body Is It, Anyway?" It was presented by ABC News corespondent John Stossel.

Dr. Berry, who operates the PATMOS EmergiClinic here on Tusculum Boulevard, was interviewed as part of a 20/20 program on the health insurance situation in this country. At his clinic, Dr. Berry accepts no type of health insurance payment. Instead, all services are paid for in cash.

The physician says that, because his clinic uses this method of payment, he is able to keep his prices affordable for the uninsured patients who make up the majority of those he treats.

The 20/20 program focused on a variety of viewpoints on the nation's health insurance situation, from patients who thought they were covered by their health insurance plans to advocates who call for a universal health-care program provided by the federal government.

Michael Moore, director of the controversial documentary movie "Sicko," was one of those featured on the program. Moore is a strong supporter for universal, governmentally-provided health-care, and indicated that he feels health care lobbyists corrupt Congress.

Moore is calling for the elimination of private health insurance in this country. Regina Herzlinger, a Harvard Business School professor, another of those featured on the program, said she believes that the health-care system in this country is a troubled one.

Health care in this country, Herzlinger said, includes many great doctors, medicine and technology, but "it's been killed." She said the problem is because other people spend the public's health-care dollars for them.

"You go to a hospital," she said, "and you have no idea what it costs."

Employers' Views

Stossel also took a look at employers and health insurance.

"Employers aren't happy with their end of the deal either," Stossel said. General Motors, for example, now spends more on paying for health insurance for its workers and retired workers than it pays for steel for the autos it makes, he said. Why are employers buying our insurance anyway? he asked.

Two-thirds of Americans get their insurance through an employer, he added.

"People think it's a good thing. But does it make sense to have our healthcare tied to our job?" Stossel asked.

What if you leave your job? Such a system ties you to your job, he said.

One Woman's Story

During his 20/20 presentation, Stossel interviewed a woman who not only has been battling breast cancer but also has been/dealing with the lack of health insurance coverage.

Vicky Readling said she quit a job to go into real estate. When she did, she purchased a temporary insurance plan to cover her until she found a permanent insurance plan. During that transition, though, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Readling discovered that her temporary policy would soon end — and that no other health insurance company would cover her because of her pre-existing condition.

One option could have been to sell everything she owned and spend her money down until she qualified for Medicare, but Readling said she was unwilling to take that route.

Instead, she has been struggling to pay her medical bills entirely on her own — and praying that her cancer does not return.

"Nobody should go through this," she cried. "It's so scary."

Overuse Issue

During the presentation, Stossel asked what if Americans had "grocery insurance" or if our automobile insurance covered things such as oil changes and gasoline? What would that do for the incomes of grocers and mechanics? "You wouldn't care how much gas you used, and you wouldn't care what it cost," he said.

"Mechanics would sell you a \$100 oil change," he said.

"That's how it works in health care," he continued. "And some people demand 'oil changes' whether they need them or not. Patients demand many procedures, some of which are not deemed necessary because they are not paying the cost.

"Since patients don't care about the costs, neither do the doctors," Stossel said. Michael Cannon, of the Cato Institute, says it has gotten to the point where doctors don't really know how much a procedure costs.

Imagine how different your life would be if insurance paid for other things — such as groceries, Stossel said. "Why buy hamburger when you could buy steak? Why look for sales?"

Canada's System

Stossel's program also took a look at the Canadian health-care system, which offers free care, but he found that it, too, had its problems.

Canadians typically must wait for health-care procedures that Americans often receive immediately, Stossel's piece reported. "People line up for care. Some of them die," said Canadian physician Dr. David Gratzler, author of the book, *The Cure: How Capitalism Can Save American Health Care*.

Gratzer said he thought the Canadian system was great until he began treating patients. "More than a million Canadians say they cannot find a regular family doctor," Stossel said.

Private clinics are now becoming more and more commonplace across Canada, he said. Some of those are illegal under Canadian law. Some Canadians go to the United States to obtain faster treatment, he said.

Would Advertising Help?

The program continued into the aspects of health savings accounts and how consumers can have an impact on the health care system. If doctors advertised, we'd see prices dropping, one grocery retailer said.

When people compete for our business, consumers win, Stossel said. He cited examples with the LASIK eye care and cosmetic surgery fields, both of which are areas of health care that are typically not covered by health insurance because they are deemed non-essential.

Because consumers must pay for these services out-of-pocket, Stossel said, they often shop around for the best prices — thus making the providers lower prices and improve quality in order to vie for customers.

"This is an example of what happens when your doctor responds to you and not your insurance company," Stossel said.

Dr. Berry's Clinic

He then led into the fact that many health clinics, such as the one operated by Dr. Berry, are springing up across the nation that charge flat-rates to provide services to patients.

"Some doctors find that dealing directly with patients changes their practice for the better," Stossel said about Berry's clinic.

"This family doctor in Tennessee said 'Enough!' to the hassles of insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid. He won't take insurance. Instead, he offers this price list with low prices."

Stossel questioned Dr. Berry about whether he can make money offering a flat-rate to his patients at prices far less than most other clinics or hospitals offer.

"Sure you can," Dr. Berry answered. "At 40 dollars a visit?" Stossel pressed. "Last year I made about the average of what a primary-care physician makes in this country," Dr. Berry said.

Dr. Berry says that not taking insurance actually saves him time and money. "I don't have to hire billers. I don't have to fight the insurance companies to get the money," Dr. Berry said.

"And that lets him keep his prices low," Stossel added.

In addition, Stossel said, "His mostly-uninsured patients save money." "Joe West paid about \$200 to have a wound on his head stitched up," Stossel continued.

"You go to the hospital, and they would probably charge you \$1,000 for the same thing," West said.

Because Dr. Berry knows that his patients must pay out-of-pocket for their health care, he often works with them and tries to help them find ways to save money.

"It's coming out of their pockets, and they're afraid. They don't know how much it's going to cost," Berry told Stossel.

Often, lower-cost generic or even over-the-counter medications can work just as well for minor problems — such as heartburn — as more expensive drugs, Dr. Berry said.

He recommends trying such medications first, before switching to a more costly medication. "Choice gives us power," Stossel said, ending his piece.

He added, "Michael Moore should know that. When he weighed about 330 pounds and wanted help losing weight, where did he go? Not to Cuba, England or France. He went to a privately-operated weight-loss spa in Florida."

View Print Version

Email This Story To A Friend

If you would like to email this story to a friend, simply fill in the information below, and we'll send a copy of this story to them -- free of charge!

Recipient's Name:

Your Name:

Recipient's Email Address:

Your Email Address:

Comments:
