

The Short Trip from Bad Teeth to Torture  
*Or, Toothless in America*  
Rich Seifert

Being toothless has many connotations. You're a redneck, inbred, poor, stupid, and probably rife with potential disease and moral turpitude. You are in short, easy to label as a social pariah, an outcast. People without health insurance have bad teeth because, if you have to pay for dental care out of your own pocket, going to the dentist, especially in Alaska, is a luxury beyond your means. Consequently, you lose your teeth, which makes eating fresh fruit and vegetables difficult, and a diet heavy in soft, processed foods exacerbates more serious health problems, like diabetes: something that is becoming epidemic in Alaska, particularly among the native population, but hardly unique to them. The pain from bad teeth can lead to alcohol abuse as a salve. And if you need work, having bad teeth is a huge handicap. Who is going to hire someone with bad teeth for a receptionist, or a cashier, even at Walmart?

Two Harvard researchers, Susan Starr Sered, and Rushika Fernandopulle, interviewed many people without health-care coverage for a book they were writing called "Uninsured in America". They noted that "Bad teeth have come to be known as a marker of 'poor parenting, low educational achievement, and slow or faulty intellectual development. They are a clear outward marker of caste.'" When the Harvard researchers asked interviewees what their first priority would be if the president established universal health coverage tomorrow, the immediate answer was 'my teeth'.

Here are just a few of the facts that demonstrate what results from having no health insurance in the United States (all from a Malcolm Gladwell article in the *New Yorker*, "The Moral Hazard Myth, *the bad idea behind our failed health care system.*" 8/29/2005):

- The **leading cause of bankruptcy in the United States** is unpaid medical bills (more on this later).
- Half of the uninsured owe money to hospitals, and a third are being pursued by collection agencies.
- Children without health insurance are less likely to receive medical attention for serious injuries, for recurrent ear infections, or for asthma.
- Lung cancer patients (the most common cancer in Alaska, by the way, as well as our leading cause of death) without insurance are less likely to receive surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation treatment.
- Heart attack victims without health insurance are less likely to receive angioplasty.
- People with pneumonia who don't have health insurance are less likely to receive x-rays or consultations.
- The death rate in any given year for someone without health insurance is 25% higher than for someone with health insurance.

Because the uninsured are sicker than the rest of us, they can't get better jobs, and because they can't get better jobs they can't afford health insurance, and because they can't get health insurance they get even sicker.

So why are Americans so devoted to this abominable, outrageously expensive health-care system? The contention I put forward here is that it is simply a failure of systemic, cumulative, human compassion. I am beginning to believe this is part of our unique American psyche, ugly though it may be. I can find no other explanation that is more complete - or more thoroughly demoralizing. Later I'll posit this as a factor explaining our remarkable ability to accept Bush administration justifications for torture. I personally see this utterly incredulous defense and acceptance of our wretched health care system as one pole of a fundamental dearth of compassion. One pole of the continuum of dispassion is the willingness to "write off" the health care, and therefore the lives of 45 million people in this country. The other pole is the willingness of Americans to accept torture of foreign declared "combatants" (and American citizens, too). This is done with willing complicity of most Americans, since there is so little public debate or acknowledgement of it, even when it is clearly denied by the President: "We do not torture!" (his Panama speech). Indeed, why deny it, since most Americans seem to be just fine with torture.

But I'll get back to this later. What is so confounding about the American health care tragedy is why Americans are so loyally defensive of it. Here again (from Gladwell, 2005) are some comparisons of our health system with international systems in western countries and Japan, those with similar economic and living standards to the US:

-Americans spend \$5,267 per capita each year on health care, almost two and a half times the industrialized world's median of \$2,193. The extra spending amounts to *hundreds of billions of dollars each year—we're talking the cost of the Iraq war in EXTRA health care costs for a system that leaves 45 million people uninsured!*

What does this extra cost get us?

- Americans have fewer doctors per capita than most western countries.
- We go to the doctor less than people in other countries.
- We get admitted to the hospital less frequently than people in other countries.
- We are less satisfied with our health care than our counterparts in other countries.
- American life expectancy is lower than the western average.
- Childhood immunization rates in the United States are lower than average.
- Infant-mortality rates are in the nineteenth percentile of industrialized nations.
- Our doctors perform more angioplasties than in other countries, but most of the wealthier countries have more CT scanners, and many have more MRI machines.

Yet there is the claim of "efficiency" that we so often hear from American propagandists for our system. Is our system actually more efficient, whatever that may mean? The United States spends nearly \$1,000 per capita for administrative overhead costs for our system, a total of nearly \$400 billion - on paperwork! This goes to those swell people who are doing their best to see that you get as few claims paid as possible, and who keep you from cheating or "overusing" the system. Canada meanwhile spends only about \$300 per capita. And of course, *every other industrialized country insures*

*everyone!* We still leave 45 million uninsured. Malcolm Gladwell (The New Yorker, 8/29/2005) summarizes the wretchedness very well in his article:

“A country that displays an almost ruthless commitment to efficiency and performance in every other aspect of its economy—a country that switched to Japanese cars the moment they were more reliable, and to Chinese T-shirts the moment they were 5 cents cheaper—has loyally stuck with a health-care system that leaves its citizenry pulling out their own teeth with pliers.”

Well a few more cheery facts, this time about the relationship between health-care and bankruptcy. This is particularly timely, since in October the bankruptcy laws were changed and now are more punitive. This effort was led by credit card corporations to close bankruptcy loopholes and bring us closer to a sort of virtual economic debtor’s prison (my opinion, clearly). But what is the main cause of bankruptcy in the United States? No surprise: it is actually medical expenses, and by a substantial margin. In their article in Health Affairs (February 2, 2005, <http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/content/full/hlthaff.w5.63/DC1>) Himmelstein et al, investigated illness and injury as contributors to bankruptcy in the United States. The latest data is mostly from 2001-2, but here’s a bit of what they found. They surveyed 1771 incidents of people who filed for bankruptcy in 2001 (1.4 million Americans filed for bankruptcy that year). About half cited medical causes. Perhaps more alarming is that 75.7 percent of those who ultimately declared bankruptcy had insurance at the onset of their illness. Among those whose illnesses led to bankruptcy, out-of-pocket expenses averaged \$11,854 since the start of the illness. What this says is that it doesn’t take very much debt to be catastrophic to someone. Even if you have insurance, it is often not enough to keep you out of bankruptcy. Moreover, 46.2 per cent of all bankruptcies in 2001 were caused by illness or injury, which caused the ill person to mortgage their home, and 54.5% of all bankruptcies were related to some medical cause. People are not only NOT going bankrupt from credit card debt in the majority, they wouldn’t even be doing so if we had a Universal Health Care system which protected them from even moderate debts. How can any reasonable person conclude otherwise? I personally know of a fellow Alaskan who has no insurance, and suffered catastrophic heart disease in 2000, and for five years struggled to pay down the hospital debt (~\$35,000). He filed for bankruptcy two days before the new federal bankruptcy law took effect in October 2005.

Is this US health care situation a failure of compassion? Advocating for, and actually achieving Universal Health Care for the United States would not only mean a huge relief of suffering and more adequate care, particularly for the poor young, but it would clearly, perhaps entirely, eliminate half the personal bankruptcies in the United States. There are likely many, many more benefits, such as lowered corruption and graft costs, and the waste in the “private” health care system which is devoted to keeping you from receiving your due reimbursements. This grating and generally annoying aspect of the insurance system we now endure, takes as much as 30% of the costs of the system as income and profit. Should the health care industry even be based on profit, i.e., a private capitalist paradigm? Personally I can unequivocally say not only No, but Hell No! Yet when I suggest this to our local Hospital Foundation, of which I am a board member, I get guffaws and sneers and am regularly relegated to the anti-capitalist, intellectual

nutcases ward and dismissed. I cannot even get the concept to be discussed rationally, as I have tried to do here. Want to make a better world, with an attempt at a more just social system? I can't think of a better place to start than with Universal Health Care for America. It seems so impossible now. But everywhere in the world where reason prevails in government-provided health care, there is Universal Health Care. Surely it is possible here.

Where does this connect with torture then? Two additional articles may clear up my direction a bit. Molly Ivins recently wrote an "I told you so" article connecting the recent passage of the aforementioned Consumer debt/bankruptcy Bill, which went into effect in October, and its affect on the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The article is entitled, "Is Congress Bankrupt of Compassion?" Anyone care to answer that? Of course there are a few compassionate souls in Congress, just like there are many Americans who are hugely compassionate and see the issues clearly. But in general, that's not the case. Then there is the torture issue. Anyone who is not outraged, as the bumper sticker on my pickup truck states, simply isn't paying attention. Yet someone as credible in this issue as Senator John McCain, himself a torture victim during the Vietnam War, seems unable to persuade a majority in congress to fully comprehend and condemn any hint of torture. In an article on truthout.org ([www.truthout.org/docs\\_2005/printer\\_111305Y.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/printer_111305Y.shtml)) McCain says it this way: "The mistreatment of prisoners harms us more than our enemies. I don't think I'm naïve about how terrible are the wages of war, and how terrible are the things that must be done to wage it successfully. It is an awful business, and no matter how noble the cause for which it is fought, no matter how valiant their service, many veterans spend much of their subsequent lives trying to forget not only what was done to them, but some of what had to be done by them to prevail."

In no way do I find this a vindicating statement, and I don't even agree with some of it, but it is certainly worthy of attention by all people of compassion. And it is that compassion which brings me to the connection between our lack of Universal Health care in the face of all sorts of evidence to its value, even necessity, and our willingness to accept torture to take vengeance on people we don't know, can't see, and simply don't have to care about. Torture and lack of healthcare are two poles of the same flawed national character: a pitiless poverty of compassion. It is simply that. America's greatest problem is a huge self-indulgence in material splendor, blended with a perception of American exceptionalism and cultural supremacy, which allows us to wallow in ignorance and avoid compassionate awareness. It's time to pay attention to reality.

Finally, let me note a homegrown example of how this plays out in our own community, and in Anchorage. My source of the following alarming health cost data is the Anchorage Daily News and a very helpful public relations staffer at Providence Memorial Hospital in Anchorage. Back in June of this year, an article entitled "Hospital bad debt driving costs up" appeared in the Anchorage Daily News. It focused on the huge increases over the last five years in bad debt and charity care health costs at both Providence (a religiously affiliated not-for-profit hospital) and the Alaska Regional Hospital, a private corporate hospital. Bad debt, just to clarify, is what hospitals think they can't recover, and charity care is what they offer (also write off) as financial

assistance for needy patients. Charity cases more than quadrupled at Alaska Regional hospital over the last five years, rising from \$1.3 million (in 1999) to 4.5 million in 2004. At Providence, they doubled from \$12 million in 1999 to \$24 million in 2004. And the cause: the increasing number of uninsured. Specifically named at a Fairbanks Memorial Hospital Foundation's Board meeting where I first heard about this, was the increasing number of big box store employees who are uninsured and using our hospitals, particularly Walmart employees. I don't think I need to say more. I believe one of the least glamorous but most crucial things we can do to make Alaska and the United States a more sane and healthy place to live is to endorse and advocate strenuously and doggedly for Universal Health Care. It is the compassionate choice.

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