

11/3/93  
National Association of Social Workers

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PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Internal Use Only

November 3, 1993

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
TO THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS  
VIA SATELLITE

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much, Sheldon, for that introduction. And I was delighted that I got to hear the very end of the speech by your former speaker. Secretary Giltaros (phonetic) is doing an excellent job representing the kinds of interests that all of us care about.

I would like to thank you, Sheldon, and Ann Abbott, and Ann Cook, and Dorothy Fowler, for chairing this conference. And I want to congratulate the awardees of Social Worker of the Year, the Lifetime Achievement Award, and Public Citizen of the Year.

I would also like to thank Sandy Harding, and Madeline Gold, and Sue Hochstetter, and all the members of the NASW, for all of your help, work, and support -- not only, but especially, with health care reform.

You and your organization have been one of the strongest voices for health care reform in this country. While plenty of groups have paid lip service to health care reform, you have actively believed in it.

Earlier in the century, Jane Addams called for the life of the larger cause, and for the need for public-spirited men and women with a thoroughly aroused conscience to push our nation forward in the direction of our highest ideals. I believe that every day you answer Jane Addams' call. And the President and I greatly appreciate your actions and your support.

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It gives me extra pleasure to talk to you all today, for I believe we share a vision of what America can, and must become. Your fundamental belief that social workers must advocate changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions and promote social justice also drives our plan for health care reform. All of us are committed to ensuring the well-being of every member of our society.

Last week, the President delivered the National Health Security Act to the Congress. This initiative represents the first time in many years that the Congress has had before it a comprehensive measure to provide health security for all Americans, and a President willing to stand behind it and push it.

This is an issue that has been considered in Congresses many times before. It goes back at least as far as when President Roosevelt was attempting to legislate Social Security. At that time, he also intended to legislate Health Security, but could not achieve that objective.

Ever since the 1930s, and in every Congressional session, bills have been introduced, and even Presidents have tried to deal with our health care problems. But there was always some reason, some timing, some excuse why we could not move forward. And so the problem has continued to develop.

We are now at a unique moment in history, when there is a critical mass in the Congress -- both Democrats and Republicans -- who are finally willing to say, "Let us hear Americans from all walks of life who are calling for the reform of our health care system." And, most importantly, we have a President who is absolutely committed to getting the job done, and who is willing to put himself and his administration on the line.

I know that in social work it is very important to start treatment where the client is. Well, in the process of drafting the plan that the President has proposed, we began where our clients -- the American people -- are.

We have listened to those, like yourselves, who care for people, and to those who receive care. We have listened to those who thought they were secure, but lost their health care coverage and joined the 2.25 million Americans who every month, for some period of time, lose their health insurance.

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We have listened to the stories of people locked into jobs because they cannot move without losing health insurance. We have listened to the excruciating tales that come from people being denied insurance coverage because they, or a child, has a preexisting condition.

We have listened to all of you, who know first-hand the benefits and pitfalls of our current system. And we have heard what you have said. We have used your suggestions. We believe that we have incorporated the best elements of the various approaches that were put forth, and have created a workable position.

We have adopted the idea of managing care and insurance reforms from the proponents of a market-driven approach to health care reform, while embracing, wholeheartedly, many of the principles of the single-payer approach.

While we may have different approaches, we all want to get to the same place: universal coverage; comprehensive benefits; fair financing, where everybody pays and everybody is responsible; and system-wide cost controls. Our plan also allows states to implement single-payer health care systems, if they choose.

Many of the problems that you face in the current system are addressed in the President's reform plan, because right now -- let's face it -- most of the cards are held by the government, or by insurance companies.

Insurers have the ability to grant and deny coverage. They compete on their ability to attract healthier patients. They have so many different insurance policies, with so much fine print, that we often see coverage exclusions where a company thought they would have coverage, or an individual had actually counted on it.

Every single day, if you are insured, your choice as a health care provider, and as a patient, is being limited by insurance company decisions that undermine your autonomy and your discretion. Now is the time for every American to stand up and say to the insurance industry, "We want our health care system back, and we intend to get it."

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Now, how do we do that? The President believes that we ought to adopt the plan he proposes for health care reform, because he thinks this is the best way, the most workable, that which can pass the Congress and have the support of the majority of our people, because our plan is based on what we have heard and learned from the American people.

And we intend to continue our dialogue with all Americans. We are open to discussion, and to negotiation. As I have told representatives of NASW, we welcome changes that will enhance and strengthen our proposal. But make no mistake. There are six basic principles on which we will not compromise, and on which our plan is based.

The first -- and most important -- is security. I know that you, too, are familiar with the human tragedies experienced by so many Americans due to lack of access to health care.

We have to reach universal coverage as soon as possible, not only because of the horror stories that come too often to our attention, but because of the denial of health care, and because of the economic reality that until every American is insured and has health security, there cannot be the kind of cost-effective approaches to health care we expect to achieve.

For too long, our system has rewarded the wrong kinds of behaviors. Why don't we pay for the well-child exam, for the mammogram, for the pap smear, instead of paying for the operation, or the chronic debilitating condition?

It is our firm belief that the package of benefits must include and emphasize primary and preventive health care. And if we can shift our focus to this while we provide security, we will not only be taking care of health problems earlier, we will be saving money.

It is time we put at the head of the list of what people need and deserve, comprehensive benefits with preventive health care. The benefits package must also include mental health benefits, and it must include substance abuse benefits as well.

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The Health Security Act, immediately upon implementation, will address some of the most discriminatory practices within the current insurance system and eliminate all differences in coverage between mental illness and physical illness by January 2001 or earlier.

We are starting with a positive base of mental health benefits and substance abuse benefits that we will build on. We are going to -- and I think I need to tell this group -- we are going to have a real fight on our hands to keep the mental health and substance abuse benefits in the comprehensive benefits package.

And we need your help to stand up for mental health. We know that without treating mental health, without treating substance abuse, we are not going to have true health care reform.

But we will have to have you standing with us to make it clear to the American people and the United States Congress that the day of discriminating against mental health is over.

We also recognize the important roles of social workers and other nonphysician providers, in both mental health and physical health care delivery. So if we believe, as we do, that security is our bottom line, then what the President has said is he will not sign any bill that does not contain universal coverage with comprehensive benefits.

We have to make sure -- you and I, working together -- the President gets a bill he can sign. And I will have to have your help in order to get that done.

The second absolute principle is that we have to simplify the system. We cannot permit it to continue unchecked, spewing out more forms and more regulations, in both the private and the public sectors, every year that goes by.

In the last 15 years hospitals, on average, have hired four administrative and clerical employees for every doctor. You have seen social work departments in hospitals be eliminated or decreased, while administrators and bookkeepers have increased.

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We have watched as we have tangled our hospitals in a web of paperwork that has no relationship to the care you and I expect when we walk in the door. We have the opportunity, now, to eliminate that paperwork that has beset our health care system.

If we can begin to tackle and finally conquer this system, we will save billions of dollars, and free up, literally, thousands and thousands of hours for health care providers, like medical social workers and psychiatric social workers, to do what they do best -- take care of patients.

The third principle is choice. More and more, the current system is limiting choice for consumers, for employers who bear the cost for most people's insurance, for those who are insured, and increasingly limit the choice as to what plans will be available.

With the Health Security Act, individuals will choose from among the plans in their area. They will decide whether they want to join an HMO or a network of doctors or a fee-for-service network or some yet uncreated way of delivering health care more efficiently.

We have to look at how we provide health care in a more organized way and, by doing so, the Health Security Act will actually guarantee more choice than is currently available in the market now.

For those of you who are employed, you have experienced that more and more employers are telling you who you can go to see, what hospitals you can use, what doctors are available to you.

We want to preserve choice. And what we have done is not only to give the power for making that decision to the individual, we have given the responsibility as well.

We need better informed consumers in health care. Most people know more about the car they buy than the health insurance plan they subscribe to. They don't know how to make distinctions among the varying kinds of services that are offered.

We need to provide incentives for them to do so -- for all of us to do so. And choice is the principle that

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will lead all of us in that direction. For example, when we have report cards on health care plans, we're going to be able to look at issues that we think are important.

As a woman, I'm going to want to know how well the health plans do in diagnosing and treating breast cancer, for example. As a mother, I'm going to want to know how good their immunization rate is for all the children that are in the plan.

Those are the kinds of informed decisions that we will be able to make, because we will have greater, not lesser, choice.

Fourth, there will be, and will have to be, savings in this system that can be better utilized. This is one of the most misunderstood aspects of health care in America right now.

We are currently spending about 14 cents out of every dollar of our income in America on health care. If we do nothing, just sit here, throw up our hands, and say, "Oh my gosh, we've tried, but just like Presidents Roosevelt and Truman and Johnson and even Nixon and everybody else who has tried, we just can't deal with this problem."

Well, then, we can look forward to spending increasing amounts of our wages on health care. We can look forward to having 20 percent of our national income, by around the year 2000, being spent on health care.

That will come, whether or not we insure one more person. So we'll spend more money without more security, without changing the system toward primary and preventive care.

The status quo is not static. It will decrease our access and quality of health care. We believe we can reallocate money, in both the private and public sector, to deliver health care more efficiently, that will enable us to reach universal coverage, and do so more cost-effectively.

You have seen -- those of you who work in hospitals or in any of our institutions that deal with health care for your clients -- many instances where we could do something more efficiently. But we have no incentives in our current system to bring those changes about.

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We will, under Health Care Reform, so that our dollars will actually go further. We are not cutting anything. We are trying to make better use of the money we currently spend.

The fifth principle is quality. There is no debate that we have the best health care system in the world for those who can take advantage of it. But we need to strengthen it and make sure it is accessible to everyone.

Any reform system must not only provide for, but require, quality standards and quality outcomes. That is a statement I think everybody would agree with. But we need better ways of making it happen. We need more information. Quality has to be the key to everything we do.

We have to ask ourselves, "Will this be good for patients? Will this be good for doctors, for nurses, for other health care providers? Will this make quality better?" Any health plan that cannot answer these questions affirmatively is a plan we must reject.

The federal government and the state governments will have to take more responsibility for collecting information about quality, and for disseminating it, so that physicians, and hospitals, and others -- as well as patients -- all know we can make better quality choices.

That's why we're calling for report cards that all of us can understand, so that we can make those choices.

The sixth principle is responsibility. Responsibility should permeate the system, and for too long it has not. We need to make sure, for the first time ever, that everyone pays their fair share in the health care system.

Everybody must pay something, because everybody must assume responsibility for their health care. We believe in a need to instill responsibility at all levels: at the individual level, where we become more responsible for our own health; at the community and public health level, where we take on the plagues of violence and teenage pregnancy and AIDS and drug abuse.

Everyone has to contribute. Everyone has to take responsibility.

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Security, simplicity, choice, savings, quality, responsibility -- these are the principles which guide the President. These are our shared goals. And upon the bedrock of these principles, we have devised a health care system that we believe will work for every citizen of our nation.

It will not be easy, but we are committed to building a world for our children where every American will have health care coverage -- and coverage that is secure, no matter who you work for, where you work, where you live, or whether you have ever been sick before -- a world without preexisting condition problems, without portability problems, without job or welfare lock; a world where every American, because you are an American -- not because you work for a big or small company, or live in Florida or North Dakota, but because you are an American -- you will be insured.

This is going to be a long national debate. There will be many who will come forward with opposition, or, what I see even more of, people who say, "We are all for health care reform. We just think we need to do it a different way, and we don't think universal coverage is necessary. But we'll get there eventually."

Let's be very careful to scrutinize every single proposal, to find out who's really behind it, and how it would work. We're confident that if everyone reads the book that the President and I are promoting all across this nation, that we will have a better health care system, because every American will take part in the debate to make it so.

There's no argument that we need to change. The argument will be over how we do it. That is why we need your help. We need you to support this plan. Any differences that we have are among friends, and among people who share the same vision of what this country can and should be.

But we have to stand united against those who do not share our vision, who really don't think it's a national tragedy if millions of Americans are still left out in the cold -- uninsured, or underinsured -- who don't see the daily struggles you see for people to keep themselves and their children healthy.

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I've traveled all over this country, and it's been a great and wonderful privilege. And I have, I guess you would say, almost private movies running in my head every day of the people I have met. And they are what keep me going, every single day, because it is for them, and for our children, that we are doing this.

Most of us -- myself and family, and you in this audience -- are insured. But we can't tell that we will be this time next year. This is not a discussion about only taking care of those who do not have. It is about making sure all of us are secure. Because any time one American is not secure, none of us is.

Thank you for caring. Thank you for your commitment. And thank you for following in the footsteps of Jane Addams and others, who, in much more difficult times, always stood for what was right for all people.

We're going to get this done. It won't be easy, but history and right are on our side. Please join us. I look forward to working with you.

Thank you all very much.

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