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CIRCLE OF CARE

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

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**REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
AT THE CIRCLE OF CARE CONFERENCE
THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
BETHESDA, MARYLAND**

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. Doctor Varmus it is a pleasure as it always is for me and my family to be here at one of the premiere institutions that represents the vital partnership between our public and private sectors in this country. I appreciate very much what Scott Oki has said today, because it clearly and personally put forth the challenge that confronts this new and very important organization.

I am a great admirer and partisan of children's hospitals. I think they play an essential and vital role in our health care system. And when I first heard about the plans for this new organization, I was delighted and very hopeful that it would not only through its commitment to supporting these 19 children's hospitals make a difference to the giving of so many of you and others like you in our two countries, but that it would stand for the belief we share that children's hospitals must be preserved and strengthened.

I have, as many of you, experienced children's hospitals as a parent and know how well they serve in taking care of both our children and ourselves because of the family-oriented approach they take to health care.

I know from my experience on the board of the Arkansas Children's Hospital, what it takes to raise private funds in order to support the many functions that are not paid for through either private insurance or government support. It is only because of dedicated, concerned citizens like all of you, that these hospitals continue to lead in the research and treatment of children's diseases. They are also essential in the training of doctors and specialists to care for our children.

I also know that the continued existence of these children's hospitals, which we love and are devoted to, depends on government support -- support that appreciates the important differences that go into the treatment of children and adults.

It is fitting that this first Circle of Care conference is being held here at NIH, an institution that is synonymous with so much of the cutting edge medical research being done in the world.

It is a symbol of our government's historic commitment to medical research. Similarly, all of the physicians, the specialists who do research and work in the children's hospitals represented here, were able to develop their expertise and training because the federal government decided to help defray the costs of training these medical specialists more than twenty years ago.

It is precisely this commitment to medical research, to academic health centers, and to children's hospitals that is at risk in the current debate going on in our country over health care today.

It is a debate filled with statistics, policy statements, and budget numbers. But behind the charts and graphs and position papers, it is really a debate about our core values as Americans -- about what we believe in, how we define ourselves as a people, and how we envision our future.

Throughout our history, we have thought of ourselves as an American family -- a family whose greatest priority was our children. As Scott spoke so eloquently earlier, a family whose encircling love and support gave children the tools they needed to make their own way in the larger world.

And so we have always prided ourselves on our compassion and on the high expectations and aspirations we hold for our children and for ourselves as a people.

For decades, this has been the American way: to put people, especially children, first. And because we have adhered to the American way, the American Dream has stayed alive for generation after generation and our country has remained strong.

Today, we are losing a sense of ourselves as an American family. We are allowing ourselves to be torn apart, divided, put in competition with each other over resources.

As the traditional underpinnings of our larger family are undermined, individual families are being jeopardized.

Most parents in America, and I would add Canada, are working as hard as they can to be good parents. I have met with working men and women across our country over the last years. I know the sacrifices they make to put food on the table, pay the mortgage or rent, cover the medical bills, and instill an ethic of work

and responsibility in their children.

Of course, parents bear the primary responsibility for their children. But it is also true that as parents struggle against all the forces that work today -- the layoffs, the downsizing, the danger in the streets -- that they face challenges that they can not meet alone.

As the National Council of Catholic Bishops said in a pastoral letter in 1991 entitled, Putting Children First: "No government can love a child, and no policy can substitute for a family's care."

But at the same time, "Government can either support or undermine families as they cope with the moral, social, and economic stresses of caring for children."

Let's not fool ourselves. National policies -- whether they are about education, health care, work, or welfare -- are mirrored every day in the lives and experiences of our children.

And unfortunately, what is happening today is no less than a historic rejection of America's commitment to children.

Today, the social safety net known as Medicaid is being dismantled at breakneck pace. It is being dismantled with very little discussion and no real dialogue. Decisions are being made in haste -- not only about who pays for health care in America -- but about who gets health care and who doesn't.

We are all for balancing the budget; we are all for giving states greater flexibility to administer programs.

But as the President has said many times, there is a right way and a wrong way to get our economic house in order.

The wrong way is to cut health care coverage for millions of children, disabled citizens, and the poorest of older Americans -- all to finance a \$245 billion tax cut for the wealthiest families in our country.

Let's not confuse flexibility with what is really going on here. We are talking about unjustified and inexplicable cuts that will affect real people and institutions like the ones represented in this room.

Medicaid is the primary source of health care coverage for nearly a quarter of all children in America -- and one third of all children under age three. More than half of those children live in families with working parents -- parents who are not receiving welfare checks.

Medicaid is the primary source of health care coverage for millions of children who are disabled or who suffer from chronic illnesses -- the kinds of illnesses that children's hospitals can take care of better than anywhere else.

Medicaid is the primary source of health coverage for nine out of 10 children with HIV and AIDS.

Medicaid is the primary source of prenatal and maternal health care for low-income pregnant women.

Medicaid is also an important source of coverage for older Americans living in extreme poverty or with serious disabilities, and the largest insurer for over two-thirds of nursing home residents.

It is a lifeline -- literally -- for millions of children and families in America.

Ripping apart this lifeline is not the American way.

It is not the American way to deny infants the shots they need to stay healthy.

It is not the American way to deny treatment to children who are disabled or desperately ill.

It is not the American way to punish hard-working parents whose family health coverage vanishes with a job change.

The number of uninsured working Americans and their children continues to go up. For every extraordinary breakthrough here at NIH that finds, for example, the genetic marker for a disease, the threat of lost private health care coverage goes up. Because as we learn more about what causes the diseases that so many of you have helped us all to fight, we will find more and more people who under current standards are uninsurable.

It is not the American way to make the oldest among us give up their possessions and live a life of poverty to pay for a spouse's nursing home costs.

The median income for older American women over the age of 65 is less than \$9000. Many of them rely for their health care, especially in nursing homes where they are the predominant population, on Medicaid.

Cutting \$182 billion from the Medicaid program will force families to make grim choices -- choices between health care for their children or nursing home care for their parents; choices between education and vaccinations, between food and prescription drugs.

You of all people know it will also force grim choices for children's hospitals. Children's hospitals represent only one percent of all hospitals, but they provide vital health care services to many children -- including the poorest, sickest and the most vulnerable.

Like Bob, I am always moved when I go into a children's hospital anywhere. Moved by the combination of terrible tragedy and extraordinary challenge, and the love and attention and skill that goes into meeting those. I walk through halls, I visit the children, I talk to the parents, and I see in their eyes that feeling that finally they are in a place that will take care of them.

Children's hospitals devote nearly half of their care to children of low income and uninsured families and more than three-quarters of their care to children with chronic or congenital conditions.

I will never forget being in the children's hospital in Cleveland, talking to a group of parents with chronically ill children. One parent, himself a professional who ran a small business, provided health insurance to his own employees, told me about his own family -- he had a healthy older son and two daughters with cystic fibrosis. Everywhere he went to find health insurance he met the same answer: his daughters were uninsurable.

And finally, the very last broker he spoke to said something he couldn't get out of his mind, and I never have gotten out of mine. He looked at this father, and said, "What you don't understand is that we don't insure burning houses."

I thought to myself, were it not for that children's hospital, who would help this family take care of their children? And I thought what if I, in a similar position that there but for the grace of God my husband and I could be, had been told the same thing?

Children's hospitals care for the premature baby who needs intensive care for the first months of life and extensive rehabilitation for years to come; for the small child who is severely injured when hit by a car and sent to a pediatric intensive care unit.

They care for the eight year old boy who contracts encephalitis, loses his health insurance, and is covered by Medicaid because of his high medical costs and severe disabilities.

The proposed cuts in Medicaid will be particularly devastating for children's hospitals. Medicaid patients on

average account for 46 percent of the inpatient days in these hospitals.

As you know, it costs more to care for sick children than adults. And children's hospitals are not able to shift those higher costs to adult patients like other hospitals could, but maybe still now won't be able to.

Already Medicaid pays children's hospitals on average less than 80 cents for every dollar spent to care for a child. The impact of a \$182 billion cut in Medicaid is clear: children's hospitals simply will not be able to provide the crucial health services they do today.

And despite your heroic efforts to double the numbers over ten thousand, to increase that line going up as high and fast as you can, there is no way that private philanthropy can pick up this enormous gap.

We need to protect the safety net provided by children's hospitals. We need to make sure that our children continue to have access to desperately needed specialized care.

We need to be sure that those specialists are continued to be trained and that we pursue research in the prevention and treatment of childhood diseases.

As this health care debate continues in the weeks and months ahead, I hope that policy makers, whatever they are or wherever they are, begin to think about these issues not as partisans, but as parents.

I hope they will not get so wrapped up in statistics and policy papers and sound bites that they forget the most basic concern of all: the well-being of all of our children.

Many of you know from your own personal experience what it is like when your child is very sick. Nothing else in the world matters to you. Will your son or your daughter, your grandchild get better? Is the illness something that will pass or is it threatening? When you face that situation, you want answers and you need them.

As parents, we use our wisdom and knowledge to plan ahead for the health of our children. We try, if we're able to, to make sure they get the shots they need and to get them to eat right and to avoid exposing them to dangers. And when they do get sick, we try to get the treatment from doctors and nurses that they need.

But suddenly, when it comes time to legislate and make policy, good parental instincts retreat.

Would we ever say as parents that only one out of four of our own children could go to the doctor, or get a vaccination, or have a hearing test? Of course not. We would demand the right to take care of each one of them.

Would we ever say with our own child, that has spina bifida or cerebral palsy, that he or she no longer deserved treatment or would have to wait and suffer the cutbacks? Of course not. We would give up the summer vacation or trading in that old car so that our child's life could be as pain-free and fulfilling as possible.

But in a precipitous and even reckless attempt to meet fixed budget targets, we are now as a society doing things we would never do as parents. We are ratcheting back medical care to children and the most vulnerable. We are violating our most sacred duty and value: caring for our young.

How can we legislate what we would not approve of as parents? How can we feel secure because we can take care of our children, when there are children around us whose parents are working as hard as they know how, but can't have that same sense of security?

There is much that this organization can do, and I am delighted to help celebrate this opening because I see it as an opportunity not only for people of like minds and commitments to come together, and to raise additional funds that are always needed in our children's hospitals.

But I hope you will raise your voices as well. Those of you who have walked those corridors as I have, those of you who have sat in waiting rooms, those of you who have held the hands of parents who don't know what is happening to them and their children, those of you who have seen the look of relief on the faces of fathers who realize that they if they can't afford the entire care, will be taken care of in that children's hospital.

I hope you will raise your voices, so that all of us will speak loudly and clearly, that our children are not only our present and our future -- they are a test of our humanity and our faith. And each of us deserves to give them all that we can and by your support of children's hospital, you are saying, "We believe in children. Help us to make that belief a reality."

Thank you very much.

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