

## Editorial

# Health disparity– a concern

Health is generally defined as being "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This definition is used by the World Health Organization (WHO) since 1948.

The above definition may not satisfy all the medical opinions but it is an effective working document and since 1948, no better definition has been proffered. The World Health Organization saw health as a fundamental human right - WHO Constitution: *"the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being..."*

Health is a fundamental human right, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the Constitution of the World Health Organization (1946). Health is also an essential component of development, vital to a nation's economic growth and internal stability. A healthy nation is a nation that has a healthy workforce that will sustain the nation's economy and institution and at the same time maintain the health of families and individuals. The Alma Ata Declaration of 1978 was intended to bridge the health gap between the rich nations and the poor nations and also within any particular nation, bridge the health gap between the rich and the poor among its citizens. Britain and Europe in sync with World Health Organization's concept, accepted health as a fundamental human right; hence they instituted the National Health Service very early. Britain introduced the National Health Service in 1948 and even extended the service to the former colonies in Africa; after the independence from Britain, most African countries did not maintain the infrastructure required for the government funded National Health Service. Canada, Australia and New Zealand maintained the National Health Service.

America is the only industrialized and rich nation in the West without a government funded National Health Service. America refused to accept health as a fundamental human right as declared by the World Health Organization and was not a signatory to the Alma Ata Declaration of 1978. America sees health as the personal responsibility of an individual. If you have money, you can buy your health insurance premium or if you have a job, your company may buy you a health insurance premium. If you have no job or if you have a low paying job, you will not have any health cover. There are about fifty million people without any form of health coverage in America. The US makes more public medical expenditure per capita than any European nation that offers a comprehensive national health care. It also spends more billions of dollars yearly as foreign assistance for health in other countries of the world, yet fifty millions of its citizens have no health care. How can any person explain this?

Health disparity remains one of the greatest injustices of our time. In the Sub-Saharan African countries, the service left behind by Britain was a good health service entirely funded by the national governments in a way similar to the system in British. After independence from Britain, most of the countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa did not maintain the infrastructure required for the government sponsored National Health Service. Health service is no longer a free commodity as before; hence the ugly health statistics starting emerging after the independence of these nations.

Reports abound of hospitals in the developing world where patients who are unable to pay their medical bills are illegally arrested and detained in the hospital premises. A caesarian section in a private hospital or clinic may force an entire village community to contribute their widows' mites to release one of their own who has been illegally detained in a hospital after childbirth.

In America, similar acts have occurred. Very sick patients just admitted in hospitals have been prematurely discharged from hospital beds without any medical treatment when the hospitals later discovered that those patients have neither the medical insurance nor the money to pay for treatment. Videos have shown confused elderly patients dumped on the roadsides in California, USA by anonymous taxis drivers who are contracted to pick up and throw away poor patients. Doctors, nurses, health researchers and health care providers follow the ethics of their profession to provide services.

The major customer for these services is not the individual patients, rather it is the government. This major customer which is the government should have some ethics for the use of the services. In my own opinion, any medical service without the humanitarian flavor is an anathema in any civilized society. The solution is political and has nothing to do with the good doctors and other medical staff who are working tirelessly. People with the right to vote will solve this problem. All people in their towns, cities, states and countries should ask their representatives/senators to sponsor a bill that makes health a constitutional right in sync with the World Health Organization.

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