

Depicting Escape Fire

Crystal S. Graening

University of Mary

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Healthcare in America, while advanced in the science and technology of it, continues to fall short of being an exceptional system for its people. Globally, the lifespan for American citizen ranked 50th when this film debuted (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). As depicted in the movie, various shortcomings contribute to that number. Healthcare in this country has turned into a system that manages and cares for diseases versus one that heals the population. Furthermore, medications are prescribed and expensive tests are done to find out what is wrong and to treat it. No steps are taken so that the individual can instead make changes to improve their health other than perhaps adding another prescription to their daily pill regimen. The focus of healthcare in America is how can it make certain people and companies money.

Both science and research show better methods and practices to use with patients, medicine continues to choose another way of thinking and caring for people. This is how the idea of an “escape fire” comes into play. As shown in the opening with the firefighter who decided to try another way, one that was innovative and against what the firefighters had been taught, the firefighter survived. The others did not. This same concept is what is occurring within healthcare in the United States. Healthcare continues to use medications and tests to manage the disease of millions, as those are the moneymakers. Very few are taking a step back to look at it in another way, a way that could save millions of lives just as the firefighter was saved by choosing a path that was not the norm. Those who do see other ways have little to no support, just as the lone firefighter.

Throughout the film, it was shocking to hear how heart stents have no real impact on the patients in whom they are placed. Each time this was referenced, I thought of the countless patients I have seen who have had heart angiogram procedures. There was one cardiologist who

often told nurses that in his perfect world, a cath lab connected to an emergency department would be ideal so that those patients with chest pain could have the procedure immediately. This example is one that was highlighted throughout the film in how physicians are taught to treat and not heal. Dr. Steven Nissen perhaps stated it best, “To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail” (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). Performing a heart catheterization is a quick method to rule out a symptom. Additionally, it is a way to bill a patient, with the physician profiting much more than if simple lifestyle changes were made. As the movie further identified, physicians are paid on a fee-for-service scale, based on how much they do and how many patients they see and not how much time is spent with a patient.

Identified Problems

Physicians are not the only contributors to the issues facing healthcare in this country. Medicine has become a business (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). The pharmaceutical industry continues to make billions of dollars every year, with the amount of money people spend on prescription medications nearly doubling since the 1990s (GAO, 2017). There are numerous commercials advertising medications on network television, with the United States being only one of two countries which allow that type of advertising, and each one of those ads ends with the phrase “ask your doctor” (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). People see those advertisements and want the medications, so physicians comply.

In addition to the pharmaceutical companies, the insurance companies also contribute to the issues in healthcare. In a report compiled by the American Medical Association (2018), it found high concentration levels within the health insurance markets within 73% of the metropolitan statistical areas studied. As explained further in the report, this can lead to an exercise of market power, thus causing harm to both consumers and providers of care (AMA,

2018). This is ethically wrong, and the film showed how the moral compass needs to get back on track, focusing healthcare on people and making the country healthier instead of certain companies and industries richer (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). The cost of health insurance continues to rise, with high deductibles and minimal incentives to stay healthy while the insurance companies have zero competition and profit off of their consumers. As shown in the film, if the prices of staple items would have increased as insurance premiums have since 1945, a dozen eggs would now cost \$55 and a gallon of milk would be \$48 (Heineman & Froemke, 2012).

While healthcare organizations, providers, and the pharmaceutical and health insurance industries comprise a large portion of the issues in healthcare, society itself has also contributed. People have a more is better mentality, that the more tests that they have the better, or the more pills they take will improve their health. People now also want instant gratification and a quick fix without having to put forth much effort. The country lives off of the idea of convenience, from stores to fast-food restaurants. Trillions of dollars are being spent on treating the consequences of obesity (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). Additionally, when people do seek medical care, they want that quickly too, choosing to visit an emergency department because it will be faster or wanting to take a pill to ease the pain. This mentality within individuals needs to change to transform healthcare, as approximately 70% of healthcare costs are driven by people's behaviors (Heineman & Froemke, 2012).

Possible Solutions

One of the major possible solutions to fixing healthcare is to start with the American population. Lifestyle changes have been proven to be beneficial to improving health. One example within the film was how the company Safeway designed their health insurance plan

around people making changes within their lives to receive reduced premiums or incentives (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). If something is worthwhile for someone and there is an incentive for it, especially a monetary one, they are much more likely to participate. Instead of focusing on increasing premiums and how to profit off of the American population, insurance companies should instead be putting an effort into making America healthier through incentive programs.

Another example given in the film was the heart disease program designed and researched by Dr. Dean Ornish. At the center of the program is the adoption of a healthy lifestyle. Much research and studies on the program identified that the program worked to reverse heart disease. While Dr. Ornish had the positive results of his studies, it still took 16 years of hard work and advocating before Medicare finally agreed to reimburse people participating in the heart disease program (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). Policies and regulations have turned the nation into one that can only focus on sick care versus preventative care (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). More programs as such need to be researched and provided to people to work towards a society that thrives on the latter.

Lastly, more use of alternative medicines in healthcare needs to occur. This is especially true for those with pain issues. So often the first choice in pain control is to prescribe a medication for it, usually a narcotic. The film provided details about a military serviceman who turned to acupuncture to help with pain control and to give up his addiction to the multiple amounts of pills he was taking to control the pain. By the end of the film, he had progressed to the point of being able to walk, something many did not believe he would ever do. He was also free of pain medications. Studies on acupuncture have found that it helps to ease pain, especially chronic pain (NICCIH, 2016). It has also been found to be beneficial for a variety of conditions, including nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy or postoperatively, dental pain,

headaches and migraines, labor pain, menstrual cramps, respiratory disorders as well as for overall wellness and the management of stress (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2018). Acupuncture is just one of many options of alternative medicine that healthcare providers need more education on, so they can provide these options and education to patients, helping others not have to rely on medications.

Summary

A quote from this film summarizes my impression and feelings towards the issues in our American healthcare system. Dr. Ornish stated, “(we) spend too much time in healthcare mopping up the floor from water overflowing from the sink, but neglect to turn off the faucet” (Heineman & Froemke, 2012). Similar to the escape fire metaphor used to open the movie, healthcare in this country is viewed as a system in which we should simply keep doing what we are doing. There is little to no recognition by many that changes need to be made to alter a broken system. The water does, in fact, keep running, and the resources and tools within healthcare are being used to mop it up over and over. The view of the healthcare system needs to also move away from being seen as one that is profitable to a few and instead valuable to the health of the people. More time, effort, and money should be invested in impactful solutions, like reversing heart disease and having people take their health into their own hands by making lifestyle changes. In many facets of our lives, we take the steps to change outcomes, but few of us do so for our health. This can change with the support of those dedicated to healthcare for the right reasons.

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