

A decorative sunburst graphic with many thin rays emanating from a central point, positioned above the title.

Introduction

Just about everyone knows that America's health care system is in deep trouble. Too many people are ill, too many medical treatments are dangerous and even deadly, and basic health care is unaffordable for a large portion of the population. Despite the much-vaunted invasion of health care by "market efficiencies" in the last few decades, the system is nonetheless approaching economic disaster.

The evidence is all around us: As medical costs continue to skyrocket each year, our health care system—if we can even call it a system—has now become the leading cause of personal bankruptcy. Health care costs now consume 18 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP)—two to three times as much as that of comparable nations—even while the quality of care is declining when compared with these same countries.

In fact, the medical care system in the United States does not perform like other businesses in the modern world, which must adapt to meet individual needs and preferences with increasing efficiency. Instead, today's managed care is increasingly impersonal and standardized, is frustrating to most patients and physicians, and relies more than ever on expensive drugs of questionable value.

It has also become clear that we cannot unconditionally trust medical research, the pharmaceutical industry, or even the FDA to set the standards that guide our physicians to create

the treatment strategies by which we live or die. As I show in this book, even the supposition that medicine is always based on solid science is simply not true.

It was 30 years ago that renowned sociologist Ivan Illich published *Medical Nemesis*, a prescient indictment of modern medicine, which, he wrote, had itself “become a major threat to health.” Today the problems posed by our medical-industrial-pharmaceutical-government complex loom far larger than Illich’s original readers could have ever imagined.

Good medicine is so much more than today’s mainstream practice of treating a set of disease symptoms with a bag of tools and drugs just to make a profit. Americans want *all* of their health needs met—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—and at an affordable cost. And our physicians and healers want a system of delivery that fulfills their desire to provide great medical care and to truly serve their patients. In the opening two chapters of this book, I explain how my own awakening to these fundamental values at midcareer set me on a journey to undo the fallacies of my medical training at Duke University.

My own story is emblematic of a health care system now at the tipping point of a paradigm shift. Massive change is afoot, and this is why the health care crisis is such a hot topic in today’s news, and why, especially in chapters 3–5, I intensively reexamine the economics, the politics, and even the basic philosophy of what health care is and how it should be delivered. There can be no doubt about it: We need to face the shortcomings of our health care system and adapt, or there will be even more dire consequences. All stakeholders need to take a much more active role in cocreating a health care paradigm that will meet all of our health needs—and we need to do it *now*.

But, unless there is a dramatic shift in the attitude of our conventional medical establishment, such solutions are not likely to come from either our physicians or the medical industry

that supports them. There is a common misperception that too much is at stake—financially, professionally, personally, and politically—to put genuine service before the profit motive. Change has been held in check by powerful forces that depend on the status quo for their survival and by the premise—usually unconscious or just below the surface—that “authority” and “precedent” should not be questioned.

But as we stated in the preface, even larger forces are at work: The roots of America’s health care crisis have originated not only in the health care system itself but in our dysfunctional cultural values. All of us are responsible for our part, but the grave problems in today’s health care are not solely the failure of our physicians, the medical industry, insurance companies, or even our political system. In this book, I identify the true culprit: an underlying fatal fundamentalism, or materialistic reductionism, underpinning how all of society thinks and operates. We have inherited an unhealthy culture that is robotically anchored in separatism, mechanism, isolationism, and fierce competition. It pits us against one another, against the needs of society, and even against the entire universe. It narcissistically supports the concept of “the survival of the fittest.” Tragically, this dysfunctional stance embodies the antithesis of what I believe is our intended meaningful purpose in life—to live with peak health and highest happiness in true community.

It will become apparent as this book progresses that it is impossible to fully mend our ailing health care system without implementing a value system in our larger society that honors service before profit and community before narcissistic needs. Of course, one part of this larger cultural and social transformation will be the work of identifying the basic essentials of what is needed to provide good health care. Such a task will require not only the collaborative participation and support of patients, physicians, and the entire health care industry, but also substantive input from political thinkers, spiritual leaders, and philosophers. This process

begins with a willingness to reassess the conventionally accepted definition of good health and, once a new model of health care is in hand, a determination to develop creative ways to deliver and pay for it. In chapters 6–8, I describe what I believe to be the emerging new model and narrate the story of my own efforts to discover this new approach in the company of scores of colleagues, as well as my efforts to bring our discoveries into clinical practice.

We can say this much in an introduction: Contrary to mainstream medicine’s definition, good health is far more than “the absence of disease.”

Yet we do little to estimate our level of wellness, even though we have sophisticated tests that can assess the functional reserves of our body; sadly, these tests are generally given only to the sick. Our bodies are truly amazing in that each organ system has a reserve of about 50 percent more than is necessary to maintain normal function. If we lose more than this reserve, however, our bodies begin to fall apart. When this happens, it is often too late to restore normal function, and we end up with a chronic disability.

But such calamities need not happen today. We know precisely what it takes for nearly every child and adult to have superb health; there’s an enormous database of scientific studies verifying that we can support wellness through maintenance of a healthy lifestyle and describing exactly how we can do so at each stage of life. For example, medical science has documented that the precursor for the epidemic of chronic diseases we are now facing is *chronic inflammation*, and we also know that living a healthy lifestyle is the ideal way to prevent inflammation.

It is possible to avoid—through health education from an early age, preventive medicine, and the consistent cultivation of healthy lifestyle factors—the entire panoply of diseases that afflict Americans today, such as cancer, heart disease, strokes, infections, hypertension, diabetes, and autoimmune diseases. We all understand that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” It is far easier to prevent disease than to treat it once

“the horse is out of the barn.” Yet, given our dysfunctional cultural values, we simply cannot find the will to do the obvious. Ignoring these commonsense practices and relying on medical intervention when sickness occurs is precisely how the bulk of mainstream medicine operates—and consequently, perfecting this approach is what most Americans have been taught is the gold standard for a good health care system.

We all know that the high cost of this style of health care has become a serious financial challenge for patients, businesses, and even the government, and the final chapter of this book examines what to do at the level of national policy. In our misguided fight against disease, 50 percent of all health care costs is spent on terminal illnesses during the last year of life, and yet at the same time, modern medicine believes it does not have the “luxury” of adequately tending to the psychospiritual needs of patients or the promotion of healthy lifestyle practices. Instead, managed care pressures physicians to treat diseases rather than human beings; after all, time is money, and given the high cost of high-tech medicine, there simply isn’t sufficient money to pay for more than the bare minimum required to get people on their feet and back to work.

The responsibility of a healer, however, does not end with providing properly functioning biochemistry and physiology—or what I call in this book the act of simply *curing* disease. Curing is merely the process whereby true healing often starts. I show especially in chapter 6 how healing is a much deeper process that uncovers the role of underlying illness, not only in relation to physical ailments and a given set of psychological challenges, but also in the context of the patient’s entire life story. These answers are usually buried deeply within, and they often take great wisdom to identify and seasoned skill to resolve.

Historically, ancient healing traditions assigned to the *shaman* the responsibility for guiding patients through life’s challenges at all levels. But with the advent of Newtonian science and

mechanistic materialism as our dominant mode of thinking, mind and spirit were banished from the practice of medicine and relegated to the domain of religion and the Church. Now, with the advent of quantum mechanics and subsequent discoveries about the physical universe and the nature of human consciousness, scientists are returning to the realization that science and spirituality have always been inseparable. It is becoming clear that our lives are deeply interwoven not only within our community, but also with the entire universe. We are all part of a vast cosmic collective and inseparable whole, and our minds and hearts are linked with minds and hearts everywhere. I further explore some of these ideas throughout the book and in the epilogue.

One of the major goals of this book is to urge you to look deeper into the causes of our failing health care system. I believe you will find that these same causes are expressed in the fatal fundamentalism that plagues *every* aspect of our culture, whether it be health care, business, politics, law, government, or religion. Before we can heal our health care system, we must heal our culture, and we cannot heal our culture unless we are first willing to heal ourselves.

