

# What If It Were Your Mother?

*What health care would you ask for?*

by Richard D. Lamm

Let me answer for myself, up front, one of the most commonly asked questions in health care. What health care would you deny if it were your mother? My answer is the almost universal answer: Deny her nothing, I want her to have everything! Of course, we all would do everything to save a loved one.

But you cannot build a health care system, or any public system, a mother at a time. This is an unfair and unrealistic standard to hold public policy to. I would also want to locate a police station near my mother's home, and I would wish to double her Social Security check, and I want a flood light in her backyard, and an emergency response system in every room. And I would hope not to pay for any of it. But applied to all of our mothers, that road leads to national bankruptcy.

My wife had breast cancer with substantial lymph node

involvement. I was frantic and did whatever it took to get her the best treatment. Thankfully, she recovered, but having a loved one with a critical health problem must be one of Dante's versions of hell. I would have spent any amount of money to buy even a marginal increase in survivability. But we all have mothers, and most of us have spouses and children: Can we all maximize their health on pooled money?

The "mother's test" is a good yardstick for your own money but not a sustainable yardstick for a health however heart felt. Every health plan must look dispassionately and intelligently at what is and what is not to be funded. They must set rules and parameters that apply to all their members equally: Mothers cannot be exempted. If some medical procedure is futile, or inappropriate, or has only a slight chance of succeeding, those procedures can legally and morally be excluded from coverage for all the membership. We can neither give mothers a different standard of care, nor can we bring up the standard of care for all subscribers to the "what if it were your mother" standard.

We are all free to provide our mothers extra safety, income, housing, clothes, but we cannot

use either a health plan or government money to do so. When we pool funds, as we do with taxpayer monies or health premiums, we have to set and live by rational distribution rules. No commonly collected pool of funds (taxes or premiums) can maximize all beneficial care to all stakeholders. This is a reality that must be understood by both citizens and doctors.

American doctors were trained in a culture that maximizes everything in health care. As Hafdan Mahler, former head of the World Health Organization, noted: "Everywhere, it appears, health workers consider that the 'best' health care is one where everything known to medicine is applied to every individuals by the highest trained medical scientist in the most specialized institutions."

It goes without saying that this is an unsustainable yardstick. The price of doing something with commonly collected funds is always that we cannot do everything. The price of joint action is limits.

Both Medicare and health plans owe a duty to their policyholders, including our mothers, but not only our mothers. We cannot pay limited premiums and limited taxes and

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receive unlimited care. We cannot make our fondest hopes and dreams the common denominator for demands on common resources. We are entitled to our equitable share and no more.

The good news about modern health care is that we can expect a lot, the bad news is that we cannot expect everything.

But as one commentator said so well: "The central problem of American politics (is) the inability of the electorate to deal with the

hard reality we all had to learn as small children: that some of something usually means less of something else....Our refusal to acknowledge that trade-offs are necessary ... makes intelligent debate about ... trade-offs impossible."

If you seek universal health care you must fight a two-front war. You must persuade the selfish and uncaring that we all have certain duties to our

neighbors and you must show the altruists that some limits must be set if we are to have a financially sound system. The price of compassionate coverage is restriction of benefits. Strange but true.

I was told by a wise person when I was 19 that "maturity is a recognition of our limitations." A mature nation must recognize that no health plan and no nation can meet the mother test. ■

# Death: Right or Duty?

## *'Ethical' medicine vs unethical health care policy*

by Richard D. Lamm

Too often, the limits of our language are the limits of our thinking. "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought," warned George Orwell. How we label something too often controls how we think about it. We get particular concepts in our head

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and they are hard to change. They govern how we think and how we act. "Disease" and "death" used to be considered as "God's will," and it took hundreds of years and no small number of martyrs to get that corrected. It was very hard to develop modern medicine when so many subjects were thought of as outside of human control. Similarly, the number of children a woman had was thought to be "God's will," and that has made the development of contraception controversial to this day. Human control over any part of human destiny is usually opposed vigorously. Humankind has the tendency to confuse the familiar with the necessary.

Science finally overcame (mostly) such concepts, however sincerely held. Medicine has developed ever more inventive

(and expensive) things we can do to the body as it ages and approaches death. Now, language limits us in a different way. Today, we have so changed the concept of death that we talk about the "right to die" almost as if death were an option. "Right to die" is a useful term in some contexts, but it has completely reversed the concept of death from "God's will" to a matter within our individual control. Too many Americans think themselves "entitled" to all healthcare no matter how marginal, and will spend unlimited insurance or government money on long-shot attempts to delay death. We have gone from superstition to hubris.

This has its own trap. Death is not an option. Shakespeare said it so well, "We all owe God a death." Humanity has a hard time