

I turn 65 this year and I have a landline telephone. That is a bad combo, because it means I have received sales calls from every supplemental insurance company in North America. Who knew old people could be so popular?

MediCare is one of those topics that I paid no attention to when I was younger. It was boring, something retirees talked about in excruciating detail, along with Doctor visits and laxatives and a bunch of other signs of aging.

MediCare has been around for over 50 years, conceived in the Eisenhower administration, enacted by President Johnson and the first recipients were former President Truman and First Lady Bess Truman. In modern terms, MediCare started as a single payer system, universal healthcare for everyone 65 or older and the same system for elected officials and the general population alike. Sounds kind of radical.

I read a great article in the New Yorker Magazine, from February Twenty Fifteen, titled "How Medicare was made" by Julian Zelizer. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the article was that Republicans and Democrats actually worked together to craft the legislation.

At the time, the American Medical Association was very vocal in their opposition to Medicare, calling it "un-American", "Moscow-like", "socialized medicine". President Kennedy pointed out the US lagged behind most other countries in the world addressing medical coverage.

Surely we must have caught up by now. The Commonwealth Fund commissioned an analysis of 13 major high income countries, including the United States, to compare health systems. To quote the report," the U.S. spent far more on health care than these other countries. Higher spending appeared to be largely driven by greater use of medical technology and higher health care prices, rather than more frequent doctor visits or hospital admissions. Despite spending more on health care, Americans had poor health outcomes, including shorter life expectancy and greater prevalence of chronic conditions."

The report has a number of interesting charts, showing health care spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product, comparing the 13 countries over the past 25 years. The Commonwealth Fund is a liberal leaning think tank and there are plenty of critics of the study. But please note this study is from before the Affordable Care Act. Our system was neither efficient nor economical before Obamacare, when compared to the rest of the advanced world.

So some countries have a straight single payer health plan administered by the government and others, like the US, have a tiered approach, combining public and private. The Center for Medicare Services has always contracted with private insurance companies to act as intermediaries with providers; To process claims and payments, investigate fraud and perform other services that are essential for such a huge and important function.

So there is an important place for private companies and government to work together. Just don't romanticize how great things were before Obamacare.

I have had several close friends and family members with serious illness and have watched them try to navigate the medical services system. It is clear to me that the more money you have, the easier you navigate the system. I would like to see Congress improve that situation but I suspect it will get worse.

Some people think the solution is simple. I know it is complicated and do not think I have any great answers. But I need to decide soon, whether to get rid of the land line phone or not.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment