

Movies

'Sicko': Effective, But Falls Short

by Patricia Salisbury

Filmmaker Michael Moore's "Sicko" is now showing at movie theaters around the country, after a highly political June 29 premiere, where activist doctors and nurses attended showings around the country to attest to the truth of the picture Moore paints of the collapsed state of health care in the United States, and the role of the HMOs in denying needed medical services. Moore had also held a joint press conference with Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) on June 20, where the two announced an escalated mobilization around Conyers' legislation for universal single-payer health-care, H.R. 676, also known as "Medicare for All." A pre-screening of the film for members of Congress took place the same day. At the press conference Conyers expressed his view that Moore's film would promote his legislation throughout the country and in the Congress. (See *EIR*, July 6, 2007, for more on the Moore-Conyers collaboration in support of universal health care.)

In the film, Moore presents vivid and powerful anecdotes and case studies, starting with footage of a man sewing up his own wounded leg after an accident, because he could not afford the medical treatment. Additional grim footage depicts an elderly couple who have health insurance, but are forced to move into their daughter's junk-filled spare room, because they cannot afford both to pay for the medications they need, and keep their home.

In one very controversial segment, Moore takes a group of emergency workers who volunteered their time at Ground Zero, during and after the 9/11 attacks, as a result of which they suffered respiratory and other ailments, to the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station and then on to Havana by boat. These heroes of 9/11, Moore reports, have been denied treatment in the United States because they were not official government employees, but instead had volunteered their services to aid in the national emergency. Dramatic footage shows the boat being turned away from the Guantanamo Bay medical facility; Moore points out that this is the one place on U.S. soil where universal, government-funded health care is provided, in this case, to the suspected enemy combatants who are incarcerated there. Moore then takes his passengers to Havana, where they are checked into Havana Hospital under Cuba's public health-care system, and receive extensive testing and medical care, free of charge.



Michael Moore's documentary "Sicko" presents a powerful indictment of the U.S. health-care system, but fails to identify the collapse of the physical economy as its cause. Moore is shown here with 9/11 emergency workers, who attempt to get medical treatment at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Not Just the Uninsured

Moore emphatically makes the point that it is not just the uninsured who are denied health care in the United States, but that the profit-driven HMO system attempts to provide as little medical service as possible to its policy-holders; this argument lends support to the provision in Conyers bill that calls for abolishing the HMOs altogether.

Moore's polemic is bolstered by video footage of a 1971 meeting between then-President Richard Nixon and advisor John Ehrlichman, of Watergate notoriety, in which Ehrlichman convinces Nixon that there is a new form of health insurance (HMOs) which represents a great way for the insurance companies to rake in huge profits, by denying coverage. In the course of the film, a number of health-care professionals testify that their jobs require them to figure out every possible way to deny benefits to policy-holders, and that the entire system is based on assuming that care will be denied.

This system is contrasted with those in Great Britain, France, and Canada, where health care is publicly funded and essentially free. While Moore makes an important point about the need for universal single-payer health care in the United States, he is entirely uncritical of the health-delivery systems of these countries, and seemingly unaware that they too are being wrecked by the collapse of the world economy.

Another area of reality entirely ignored by Moore is the destruction of the health infrastructure of the United States, built up after World War II under the Hill-Burton legislation, which required an adequate number of hospital beds and health-care professionals per thousand population, in any given county. Moore's ironic and polemical style would be well-suited to a case study treating the destruction and 2001 closing of D.C. General Hospital, the last remaining public hospital in Washington D.C., and the deterioration of health care in the nation's capital since then, symptomatic of the decline in health infrastructure throughout the nation. Perhaps Moore should begin work on "Sicko II" and finish the job.