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D219

Term Project

The PBS documentary film, “Dollars and Dentists,” is an informative video, which presents the flaws of the dental system in the United States, while highlighting the challenges faced by the dentistry community. This type of corruption can be found in fields affecting general society, that is, in many general practices where corporate offices put profit before their patients, which undermines patient care and ultimately causes disintegration between medical care and the profit motive. The documentary reveals, that many people can neither afford dental insurance or the financial consequences of with-going proper coverage. This dilemma causes many people to avoid going to the dentist until it is an absolute emergency, which negatively affects the patient’s prognosis and overall health (including the possibility of death), while fundamentally undermining the intention of the dentistry community.

Although I was aware of many elements in regards to the status of dental health care in the U.S., this documentary helped me gain a unique understanding on some of the unsolved underlying issues in our country’s dental system. Personally, I’ve had close family and friends who have had to make the choice between adequate dental care and groceries. This should not be the case. There needs to be a system in place that has the balance of affordability and preventive care that is not based upon class in our society. When you have a low-income job with no benefits and you are trying to feed a family, the lack of priority of dental visits is an unfortunate and correctable dilemma, which needs to be addressed as a priority of national health and individualized empathy.

These types of families most likely have Medicaid for their dental coverage, and, when the situation really is dire, also struggle to find a dentist who will treat them. The low salary dentists receive within the framework of Medicaid is what causes many dentists to be reluctant to participate. The lack of participating dentists creates lower resources and longer waiting times for the Medicaid patients. In the end, it is a vicious cycle that often forces many individuals to neglect serious oral health issues.

There are still many people who are unaware of the long-term damage of tooth and/or gum infection can bring. The spreading infection, if not treated right away, can ultimately lead to sepsis. Our head and neck contain fasciae spaces that underlie the skin and surround muscle, bones, vessels, nerves and organs. Pus can easily disperse into these spaces and eventually progress to any vital organs, such as the brain or heart. These situations can be prevented by education and regular visits to the dentist.

In different communities, there are many different cultural beliefs and attitudes towards dental care. Living in a very diverse city, I am aware that many immigrants have a set of beliefs that usually are influenced by their country, families, and the generations before them. Being raised in the United States, culturally, we are one of the few countries in the world that are obsessed with the notion of straight, white teeth, and a “Hollywood” smile. Because of these attitudes, we have an emphasis on perfection and make it a focus to whiten our teeth and blur any imperfections, while the poor and less fortunate in our country have a different and all-true reality.

The sad story of the woman who is hearing impaired from the documentary, elucidates the important aspects of our current dental health industry that need to be solved. The fact that she was charged interest for a medical procedure, and the subsequent sanction by the Pennsylvania government, demonstrates the conflict of interest between the medical community and the profit-motive.

In many parts of Europe, where there is socialized dental care the profit-motive is irrelevant and patients have better access to affordable care. From watching the documentary and discussing the issues with my classmates, I realize the lack of proper care for the poor this is the largest contrast I see compared to other nations. What is encouraging, is that since the U.S. has some of the best individual dentists in the world, if the underlying problems of affordable dental care can be addressed and solved within poor communities and the profit-motive is eliminated and/or more realistically mitigated, then we can combine the power and innovation of the U.S. dental community with the best proposals and wide-spread coverage of other socialized nations.

From my early childhood experience in Poland, biannual visits in grammar school to the nurse and mandatory, and extensive education on teeth care we were given consistent preventative care. The fact that culturally dental appointments were kept to on a consistent and diligent schedule, allowed for consistent prevention and much more even healthcare across all classes. In the U.S., dental care (and healthcare overall), is based more on a class system, which dictates the quality and access of dental care. This is especially true comparatively, in relation to children, who are the most vulnerable of our society, yet are predisposed to lackluster care, in the situation of the lower-case, because of the status quo system.

The most impactful strategy to help come to a solution to improve the dental care situation in our country is to educate people on the importance of regularly visiting the dentist and maintaining healthy teeth. If one goes to the doctor when there is already pain and extreme discomfort, instead of practicing proactive preventative care, the patient is more vulnerable to expenses and more serious health consequences. Unfortunately, another problem is that dental insurance is separate from an individual’s general health insurance. There needs to be initiatives in the U.S. that combine the effective efforts of other nations, in regards to affordability and access to care, to combat the pervasive lack of preventative care for the poor in our society, while avoiding treatment that is motivated by the profit-motive. The combination of education and better access to dental health-care is an effective compromise to improve the vulnerable points of our system, while encouraging the growth of efforts that will provide long-term sustainability.