



Nationalized Health Care? Now That's Scary!

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Nationalized Health Care? Now That's Scary!



Halloween here in Washington, DC, and all of the ghosts and goblins are out, trying to scare the medical oncologists in the neighborhood. Of course, it's always Halloween in DC. All you had to do is tune in the Thomas hearings and you get the idea.

But don't kid yourself, the clowns are as dangerous as Freddy Kruger. As the final regulations for RBRVS approach, it isn't hard to imagine the regulators saying, with a sly little smile, "Trick or Treat?" Of course it's easy to bash bureaucrats and Congressmen, but then they give us so much to work with. The horror stories about the Hill and all of the bureaucracies are enough to raise the hair on your head. Take AWP-15%—please. But, the HCFA folks in Baltimore have more tricks in store than you can imagine. For example, they are contemplating the idea of Ambulatory Patient Groups (APGs), which bundle together the physician outpatient component and all of the ancillaries and drugs into DRG-like entities. Brrr!! Gives me a little chill. Sure, let's see if we can give physicians more incentives to use cheaper therapies; a natural cap on the amount that they are willing to spend on drugs and biologicals sounds like a good fright night. And what a great way to put hospitals at risk for physician behavior!

Spooky, eh? I hear more and more people talking about that great classic horror story: nationalized health care. Ordinary folks who know that I'm in the health care military industrial complex are telling me that something has to be done about costs. I'm sure you're hearing the same story: My costs are out of control. There are millions

of people without insurance and the tab for those with insurance is incredibly high.

So the solution is to have the Feds take over. I've lived in Washington, DC, for almost 20 years, and this is probably the most chilling concept I've ever heard. It's a little like the promotions for movies about creatures under the stairs or one of those slasher flicks. Woo.

Unfortunately, all of your worst nightmares about Washington, DC, are true. There are bureaucrats that get carried away with their power. There is a mass of bureaucratic machinery that tends to crush innovation and perpetuate (if not reward) mediocrity. This is not to say that there are not good people in the government or on Capital Hill. But, just like in our hospitals and practices, there are losers, and in DC they are given incentives to STAY and STAY!! (One of my cures is to limit the term of office for bureaucrats—a good salary for six years and then they have to go!!)

Here are two illustrative Halloween bedtime stories: A new wide-eyed Agency Director was appointed during the Carter Administration. He came into office, and the regular staff immediately put out the word that no one should do what he asked. They stonewalled him. He asked. He commanded. He made promises. He might as well have been talking to himself. After a while he began to get it. He could say anything, but no one was going to do anything about it! After about two weeks there, he made a fatal error. He fired someone incompetent. In a number of cases, the secretaries in high-level positions are there because people kept promoting them to get rid of them. This secretary was a case in point. She made \$60,000 a year, worked for the Agency Director, and refused to do anything—things like correspondence and answering the telephone; things someone from outside DC might believe were part of a secretary's job. So, he fired her, and within 24 hours he was DOOMed. He was slapped with a personnel action and after that wasn't allowed to make any personnel changes in his agency! The old bureaucrats got him. He was dead from the outset.

Not every agency operates that way, but

some could be renamed "AGENCY OF THE LIVING DEAD." John Yarbrow, who spent almost five years in DC, once said: "If you spend three years in DC working for a Federal agency, there is some question about your sanity. If you spend five years, there is no question!"

Here's another spooky story about the folks who are making POLICY while you try to get a good night's sleep. When I was interviewing people for my doctorate, Jerry Yates, who spent some time at NCI, told me a great campfire story. "You have to remember," said Jerry, "It's a paramilitary organization." "Once," he went on to say, "the Secretary asked me a question, and I prepared a response. My response was edited by my division director and returned to me for corrections. The second draft got to the NCI Director's office and was edited and returned to me for corrections. The third draft made it to the NIH Director's office and was edited and returned to me for corrections. OK, so was it over? No, the next draft was edited by the Secretary's office and returned to me for corrections! Of course, at that point, it bore no resemblance to anything that I had originally written." Here it is folks, THE MEMO THAT WILL NOT DIE—it keeps coming back again and again! Does this sound familiar to any of you with a Federal grant?

What does all this scary stuff have to do with health care? Will the bureaucrats at HCFA, NCI, and FDA conspire together to stop progress? Will Hill staffers believe some of the stuff that they hear from these Agencies? Will the Hill feel compelled to pass legislation that will make physicians government employees? Well, campers, you'll just have to wait and see. Things could look better in the light of day, but you'll have to tune in for the next episode to see what happens. In DC, there are a number of people who dress up on Halloween as dragons. But, don't get your hopes up looking for a white knight. Remember, sometimes the dragon wins. Sleep tight!

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