Hamlet and Health Care

October 18, 2008 By David Weiss

Kronberg castle in Denmark, immortalized by Shakespeare in ?Hamlet?, is situated at Helsingør, or as the bard called it, “Elsinore”. The castle was built by the Danish king Frederik II in 1590.

As this is written, I am sitting on a bench in Helsingborg, Sweden, looking out over the strait of Oresund towards Hamlet?s domain, but what comes to mind isn?t Shakespeare?s tragedy, but rather the tragedy that is health care in the United States.

Relative to households in the United States, the average Swedish family income is considerably less. In fact, the average household income in Sweden is less than the average income for black Americans, which comprise the lowest-income socioeconomic group in the U.S. Nonetheless, Sweden has a dazzling array of new hospitals and plentiful supply of doctors, nurses and state-of-the-art medical technology, and the Scandinavian country can confidently boast it provides first-class care to its nine million inhabitants. Despite the astronomic cost of the medicines that maintains the health of those of us living with HIV, virtually every legal resident of Sweden receives those medicines for a fraction of their cost in the U.S. Atripla, for example, which costs from $1,600 to $1,800 per month in the U.S., is provided at no cost (other than taxes, of course) to Swedish residents.

Yes, folks, you read it right - everyone with here in Sweden who takes Atripla every day receives it for free.

Low cost or cost-free HIV meds aren?t the only health care benefits that the Swedes receive. Sweden?s cancer survival rates, infant mortality and life expectancy figures all outstrip many of its European neighbors.

So how does Sweden do it? The simple answer is that Sweden has a long history of spending lots of money on health care. Instead of spending hundreds of billions of American dollars for bullets and bombs, the Swedes spend their money building hospitals.

I?m not suggesting that America should abandon the millions of people in other countries who are murdered or maimed every day by conflict or genocide, and the $700 billion that we spent bailing out Wall Street along with the rest of the world may well have been necessary. The United States is a great nation, and greatness does have a price. But something, as they say, is rotten in Denmark...

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