Obama Cares

March 23, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

I had the privilege of sitting in the House of Representatives' gallery on Capitol Hill to watch President Barack Obama deliver his speech on health care reform in September and, later, to bear witness to the first House vote on the original health care reform bill. Most importantly, this past Sunday, I watched the House pass H.R. 3590, the "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act"--a bill that will unquestionably keep many Americans from destitution and death. The bill alleviates the fear that I, as an HIV-positive woman, have nervously harbored for more than 14 years--the fear of finding myself without health insurance and therefore, without access to the medications that keep me on the daylight side of the newly sprung spring grass.

During a session of run-of-the-mill votes, the floor of the House reminds me of a bee hive. From the balcony high above the curved wooden benches you can watch Congressmen and Congresswomen and their staffers flit about Apoidea-like, zipping in and out of aisles, crossing the room to share papers, secrets, questions, plans. Only the primary colors of the women's outfits and the sporadic shocks of white hair break through the sea of grey and black suits. Glasses go on and off. Voting cards are slipped into and out of the vote boxes. Doors open and close, people come and go, yeas and nays appear in a green electric glow and then mysteriously disappear on the wall above the gallery--and history is made, like honey, a million little movements at a time. Sometimes, the outcome of a vote is important to a few people. Sometimes, as on the nights I watched, it affects us all.

On the Trifecta of historic evenings that I sat in the House gallery watching history unfold, I witnessed Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC) call our President a liar. I watched as the House Republicans desultorily placed their alternate version of the original health care reform bill over their faces during the speeches prior to the first go-round of voting on health care reform in the House. And I listened as Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R-Texas), called Rep. Bart Stupak (D-MI)--the man, mind you, who penned an amendment to the health care reform bill that would ensure that no federal dollars would fund abortions--a "baby killer."

They were but three brief low moments amidst three otherwise amazing nights that have, thankfully, led to hope for health for all Americans--some of whom who may have otherwise been forced to choose between paying to keep a roof over their heads and buying medicines that could keep them on the planet.

But in those moments of churlish antics, I wondered how certain grown men and women charged with protecting the welfare of all Americans could believe that they could act like petulant children denied an ice cream cone, and still hold the respect of the American people. As a journalist, I staunchly defend freedom of speech and relish the healthy--and even raucous--debate of ideas. But it seems to me that it is not too much to ask for our political leaders to maintain a certain level of decorum when deciding the fate of the health of our nation and its people. When you are a guest in the gallery, you are asked to be respectful. You are not supposed to applaud, shout, yell, laugh, cajole or stand up and sit down in favor

of, or in protest against, a given comment or outcome as those on the floor may do. But given the nature of the discussions I watched and the impact their outcome would have on so many people who need medical help and can't afford it, I had to draw deep on my manners to stay seated--and silent.

Watching those heated and tense moments of Congress-gone-bad, I realized that the people we elect to run our country are, at the end of the day, just fallible people like you and me. Prone to weakness and outbursts and dogged thinking despite persuasive evidence that clearly opposes their belief. (Heck, even Biden's dropping F-bombs.) Which is why it is all the more impactful to know that many people in Congress who may lose the next election for doing so, voted for the health care reform bill. To see an elected official put the well being of Americans before the security of his or her own political future has restored my faith in the notion that the majority of the people we have elected to protect us have the capacity to think of others (us!) before themselves. For those who smugly suggest that implementing changes that 55 percent of Americans didn't want will lead to the demise of the Democratic party, I say, well, if the Dems do go down, they will have at least gone down having done some good.

As a woman living with HIV, I have faced many of the perils that the current health care reform bill addresses. Time was when, because I was afraid to disclose my HIV status to my employer for fear of being fired, I shelled out of pocket nearly $1,200 a month for private health insurance. And nearly $2,500 for HIV medicines. After tax. I lived on Triscuits. And borrowed money from my family. Money that, thank God, my family had to loan me. Had they not, or chosen not to, I would likely be dead. While I am grateful for that support, I am also horrified at the toll my health concern took on my family and the sacrifices they had to make in order to keep me alive.

I have had my health insurance company try to remove my expensive self from the list of patients they cared for. I have been denied coverage for a pre-existing condition, forcing me to stay in a job--and with a health insurance company--that kept me from advancing my career. This, in turn, prevented me from making more money and leveraging myself into a position where I could go from being potentially a drain on the system (say, a person on Medicaid or disability) to someone who was healthy, gainfully employed, and able, through my tax dollars, to help others who were truly incapable of helping themselves.

In short, it was only through luck, a lot of cold hard cash and exhausting navigation of my health insurance company's paperwork, bills and systems that I (and my family) managed to keep myself alive with HIV. But the fear and stress and financial strife associated with it all was damn near enough to kill us at times. And correct me if I'm wrong here, but securing health care shouldn't cause disease--or mortality.

Having gone through all that before ending up in a job I love, with full disclosure of my medical condition and affordable medical care, I am particularly sensitive to those who are not currently able to access and afford care and treatment for any health issue. Each time I have gone to an AIDS hospice in America, or visited people living with HIV at an AIDS clinic or support group and heard how they have struggled to stay alive, I can't imagine that a nation as wealthy and sophisticated as ours has failed so miserably to care for the welfare of its people. In my travels around the world, I have seen much poorer nations with much more fragile infrastructures and leadership ensure for the health of their people. If they can do it (albeit, some of them, with great financial support from the U.S. of A.), we should be able to too!

Having worked in HIV for nearly four and a half years and seen firsthand the deadly impact of lack of health care insurance on people living with the virus, I know that where we were was not sustainable. People were once again in danger of dying on AIDS drug assistance program (ADAP) wait lists; positive

people were being financially crippled by the “doughnut hole” in prescription drug payments; people were afraid to go off disability or Medicaid and return to work for fear of losing or being denied health care benefits. And people were afraid to get tested for HIV for fear that if they tested positive they would be denied health care insurance and/or have to wait a year before being fully covered by a new plan. And who would want to discover their HIV status only to have to face the dreadful reality that they couldn’t pay for the meds that would save their life? Talk about a broken system...

But that has changed. Now, those of us who are well enough to care for our fellow Americans who can’t care for themselves will do so.

And that is not socialism. Nor heavy-handed government rule. It is humanitarianism.

I find some Americans’ unwillingness to help their fellow citizens shocking. Now don’t get me wrong. My willingness to hand over, without resentment, nearly half of my hard earned dollars to care for others is not totally altruistic. It’s selfish, in two ways: first, I feel good knowing that I am capable of contributing to a general pool of funding that will help others stay well; and second, I take solace in knowing that should I become infirm or too unwell to care for myself, my fellow Americans will help me. (At least I hope that some of those dollars I pay in will still be available if and when I need them.)

Of course, “Obamacare” is not perfect. One of its big shortcomings for people living with HIV is the omission of the “Early Treatment for HIV Act (ETHA)”--a bill that would have enabled coverage of lifesaving medicines for people living with HIV sooner, thereby increasing their chances of survival. The current bill also fails to address the full human and health rights of gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered people. And that needs to be remedied.

But H.R. 3590 is much more than just a Band-Aid. Thanks to this health care reform, the lives of millions will be bolstered and saved.

There is one more step that needs to be taken to cement the current bill into law--the Senate’s vote. As I write this, Republicans in the Senate are concocting many excuses to delay voting on the bill. And as the seconds tick away, more people get sick, and die.

Steps are being taken to further expand the health care reform bill signed into law by President Obama--approval of a budget reconciliation package proposed by the House on Sunday after it voted to approved H.R. 3590. As I write this, Republicans in the Senate are scrambling to block the additional health care guarantees specified in the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 (H.R. 4872).

If the Senate doesn’t approved H.R. 4872, they will be hurting not only Americans in need but their own political futures. Because this country has shown that it is not only ready for--but insists on--change.

My guess is the American people are just as likely to turn against a party who would deny us our right to health as we would have been to turn against an administration that proved ineffective. Some have said that approval of the health care reform bill is a political win for Obama and the Democrats. And it is. There is little question that the passing of this bill engenders faith among the American people that we have powerful leadership that can effect the change they promised.

President Obama and the Democratic leadership, particularly Speaker Pelosi, should be congratulated. Even (I tremble slightly as I write this as I am so totally pro-choice) Rep. Stupak (a man, mind you, who

infuriates me for his stance on abortion) deserves credit for subordinating his own special interest agenda to that of the greater good of the American people (Okay, I know, he struck a deal. But he didn't have to...)

Anyone who doesn't think every single person on U.S. soil has a right to have their life saved is every bit as much a killer as any woman who exercises her right to choose. If Stupak is a baby killer than what are those who would deny a fellow American access to care and medical treatment?

And anyone who wants to call President Obama a liar now is simply unwilling to embrace the truth: that we are in a world of change and that the change we have affected for American health care is good for everyone. Because no one knows when they will find themselves out of work, low on dough and in need of seriously expensive medical care.

I heard many things along the way of health care reform over the last months. But something a young college student said to his friend at the "Kill the Bill" rally outside of the Capitol on Sunday night struck me as a perfect summary. I overheard him say, "Let me get this straight. These people are protesting Americans' universal right to health care? Please, explain how that's a bad thing."

His friend answered with a shrug and said, "I know. It doesn't make any sense. Why would we not want all people to be able to stay well? Seems pretty simple to me."

And it is. Anyone capable of realizing the relative precariousness of their good fortune and good health should be able to see the value of sharing that wealth to keep our fellow Americans well. Because in a single moment, a single pink slip, a single accident when you don't have health insurance, or a single unprotected sexual encounter could land any of us in a world of hurt. And were they to find themselves in pain and in need of medical help that they couldn't afford, I'd bet even the staunchest opponent of this bill would be grateful that President Barack Obama and his fellow Democrats cared enough to risk their own political future to ensure for the health and safety of our nation. My hope is that in return, we protect and re-elect the man who places the welfare of the American people before his own need for power. Ironically, in doing so, he has only strengthened my support.

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