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WHAT KIND OF LIFE: THE LIMITS OF MEDICAL PROGRESS. By Daniel Callahan. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1990. 318 Pp. \$19.95.

*Reviewed by Francis J. Hearn, Jr.**

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me,
and of any man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile,
and none shall be less familiar than the rest.¹

Walt Whitman wrote these words during the mid-nineteenth century, a time when a young American nation was emerging, American literature grappled with the notion of an American identity, and American ideals and values were formed. Whitman and other American writers captured a truly distinctive American ethic, one which resisted any form of limitation while professing an idealistic love of one's self. It is this American ethic that has encouraged progress into new endeavors and led to incredible success in the areas of health, science, and technology. Yet, in the words of Daniel Callahan, it is this same American ethic that has produced a failing health care system which pursues endless medical progress at increasingly exorbitant costs.

This is an inherently disturbing concept for any American reader of Daniel Callahan's book, *What Kind of Life: The Limits of Medical Progress*. To think that our own ideals and values are at the root of today's health care crisis is simply absurd. How does the individual pursuit of good health care condemn our health care system? Why should each American expect less than a long and healthy life? Should not society's economic and political tools fix the American health care system?

These are among the questions that emerge from Daniel Callahan's radical proposition for confronting today's health care crisis in the United States. Callahan recognizes that such questions will constitute the typical reader's response, and he brilliantly embarks upon a path along which he methodically provides an alternate and viable basis upon which the Ameri-

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1. WHITMAN'S, SONG OF MYSELF—ORIGIN, GROWTH, MEANING 7 (James E. Miller, Jr., ed., 1964) (1892).

can health care system may begin to be cured. Callahan urges the reader, as a representative of society, to “fully understand [society’s] present and future demands” in order to avoid the “patchwork solutions” that have plagued our system already.² In order to achieve this basic understanding, Callahan asks the reader to reconstruct his way of thinking about health, formulate a proper place in his life for the pursuit of health, and then concentrate upon devising a reasonable, balanced system of health care.

Callahan professes the ideal health care system as one that:

seeks not to constantly conquer all disease and extend all life, but which seeks instead to enhance the quality of life; which seeks not always to overcome the failings and decline of the body, but helps people better accept and cope with them; which tries to keep in view that health is a means to a decent life, not a value in its own right It is a system that aims to intensify inward, seeking not the endless conquests of all new frontiers, but only those that promise a more coherent individual life within a more coherent societal life. Implosion must replace explosion.³

After laying this foundation, Callahan proceeds to explain the need to change the current American health care system, the solution and its practical implications, and the remaining unanswered questions arising from the formation of this ideal health care system.

Chapters two and three, respectively entitled “On the Ragged Edge: Needs, Endless Needs” and “Hopes, Vain Hopes: The Pursuit of Efficiency,” demonstrate how the American health care system is guaranteed to fail. As described by Callahan, it is a system that strives to meet all the individual health needs of a society and cure all diseases, while at the same time achieving the greatest degree of success in the most economically feasible manner. These two objectives run counter to each other and are neither possible as a reality nor plausible as a moral goal.⁴

Callahan artfully analogizes medical treatment and progress to a piece of rough cloth. No matter how careful one tears the cloth, there will always be a ragged edge. It is impossible to achieve a smooth edge due to the composition of the material. Similarly, no matter how far we push the frontiers of medical progress, there will always be individual medical needs requiring more progress and funding. Thus, a ragged edge will always exist. It is

2. DANIEL CALLAHAN, WHAT KIND OF LIFE: THE LIMITS OF MEDICAL PROGRESS 13 (1990).

3. *Id.* at 22-23.

4. See generally Edmund D. Pellegrino, *Rationing Health Care: The Ethics of Medical Gatekeeping*, 2 J. CONTEMP. HEALTH L. & POL’Y 23 (1986) (observing the paradox of an economic and market system exploiting the physician’s self-interest and the public’s expectation that the physician must act in the patient’s best interest).

impossible to achieve any smooth edge in the context of medical treatment and progress due to the present composition of the American health care system. Our hopes of reducing health care costs thereby dwindle. As aptly described by Callahan, our system is inherently flawed.

At this point, the reader begins to understand that his outlook on medical progress and the health care system must be changed; but to what? Callahan recognizes the reader's frustration and methodically soothes his apprehensions in the subsequent chapters by offering a viable solution and its practical implications. Callahan already laid the foundation by informing the reader of his view of the ideal health care system. After tearing down the reader's existing beliefs, Callahan revisits his ideal health care system and begins to describe an alternate and viable way of thinking about health in the American society and formulating a reasonable method of care.

In the later chapters, Callahan argues that new priorities and goals must be established. Good health no longer should be sought as an end itself, but rather as a means to achieving other goals in life. The emphasis in health care must shift from an individual's perspective to a societal perspective—from one of "curing" every possible disease to "caring" for those in need. A recognized mortality must develop. The unlimited pursuit of health care to avoid death must be abandoned because it causes a continued neglect of other viable institutions such as education. Americans must begin to reallocate funding and resources from the ever-absorbing realm of health care to the other life enhancing institutions in society. Quality of life, not longevity, must be given priority in our society. The pursuit of health must take its proper place in our lives. As Callahan concludes, "A system that guaranteed a minimally decent level of healthcare for all, in turn asking each of us to rein in our private demands, would be a decent and manageable one. That is not an impossible ideal."⁵

Callahan's ideal system of health care and his supporting propositions seem to be at odds with the basic American ideals and values formulated in the mid-nineteenth century and which developed over the last 150 years. Reign in our private demands? Impose limitations on our individual aspirations? One wonders what Walt Whitman's response would be. Yet, as Callahan persuasively argues, in order to correct a failing health care system and make more care available, Americans must reexamine their desires. As Callahan states, "[g]ood health in the absence of a sense of purpose or meaning in life can seem a worthless good."⁶ It is far better to have a purpose or

5. CALLAHAN, *supra* note 2, at 264.

6. *Id.* at 107. See also George P. Smith, II, *Triage: Endgame Realities*, 1 J. CONTEMP. HEALTH L. & POL'Y 143, 150 (1985). ("Life should not be viewed as an end in and of itself, but rather as something that should be preserved so that other values can be fulfilled.")

meaning in life which good health may enhance. Aspirations and dreams remain in our society to promote future progress, yet society must keep a discerning eye on reality. Overall, Daniel Callahan's *What Kind of Life: The Limits of Medical Progress* brilliantly and masterfully presents a novel, thought-provoking, and alternate method of confronting today's American health care crisis.