
Bookworm's Corner

Book Review

Arnold S. Relman, M. D. New York: Public Affairs, 2007. 205 pp. \$24.00 hardback, ISBN-10: 1586484818, ISBN-13: 978-1586484811.

A Second Opinion: Rescuing America's Healthcare

Reviewed by Nada Elias-Lambert, LMSW

University of Texas- Arlington

With healthcare reform at the forefront of political debate, Dr. Relman's book comes at a timely point in American history. With the prevailing rhetoric and healthcare reform proposals being touted by recent presidential candidates, the general public may be having a hard time separating myths and self-serving claims from reality. In *A Second Opinion*, Dr. Relman provides a 'second opinion' about the state of our healthcare system and the major reforms it requires. He outlines a thoughtful and measured approach on how to effectively rescue America's healthcare system. *A Second Opinion* does an excellent job of dispelling the confusion about healthcare reform and helps readers understand key facts and issues that demand new policies. Dr. Relman's background as a practicing physician, author, professor and medical journal editor, in addition to his clear compassion for people, provide him with a solid background to write this book.

This book is divided into four sections. In the first sub-section, Relman provides a brief history of the American healthcare system and the problems associated with its commercialization. He discusses how healthcare has transformed from a professional service for the sick to one of the country's largest industries. He addresses the fact that today's healthcare system is more about making profit than it is about wellness or helping the sick and injured. Relman states that this transformation of healthcare is primarily responsible for today's healthcare problems.

The second sub-section discusses ways in which government and private insurers have tried to contain the rising costs of healthcare and why these efforts have been unsuccessful. Here, Relman discusses the different types of reform attempts, such as HMOs, Medicare, Medicaid, and the new concept of Consumer-Driven Healthcare. Recently, attempts at reform are more focused on trying to create competition in the healthcare industry in order to lower costs for consumers. But, as Relman contends, healthcare should not be an industry where its focus is on creating competition, as in other types of industries. The goal of the healthcare industry should

be to create a system of providing quality healthcare to all members of the community at an affordable price.

In the next sub-section, Relman proposes a plan for reform of the U.S. healthcare system and considers practical problems of achieving this proposed reform. His proposal includes: a) changes in the insurance and delivery systems of American healthcare that could potentially control the rising costs, b) provide universal coverage, and c) improve the quality of care provided. His recommended solution is for single-payer insurance that is funded primarily through federal taxes and administered by a centralized federal government entity. Relman's proposal would mandate a major overhaul of our current healthcare system, but the potential gains from this overhaul are perceived as invaluable. There are two parts of his proposal that he maintains will make it work. He states that single-payer insurance is necessary, but that is not sufficient by itself. He also believes major reform to the way physicians are organized in practice and how they are paid is also necessary for an overall healthcare reform.

In the final sub-section, Relman compares the healthcare systems in the U.S. and Canada and attempts to appeal to the moral conscience of physicians. He analyzes and discusses the features of the Canadian healthcare system and characterizes it as a good model, in most ways, for America. In his final chapter, he pleads with physicians to seriously address the cause of major reform. He reminds physicians why they became physicians in the first place: to help those who are sick and/or injured. He urges physicians not only to support the development of single-payer insurance, but to also help devise the delivery system since they are the 'major players' in delivery of healthcare.

This book is essential for anyone interested in learning more about America's healthcare system and how it got to where it is now. This book is useful for social workers because it addresses how to reform one of the major United States systems that provides various obstacles to many social workers' clients. Social workers often advocate on behalf of their clients rights to healthcare, regardless of ability to pay or situational circumstances, and this book provides a potential way to reform our current healthcare system to better assist our clients.

Relman's book provides an excellent summary and analysis of the current healthcare system in the United States and recommends specific, fundamental changes to how the system is financed and how care is delivered. Relman discusses how social policy needs to be changed in order to reform the U.S. healthcare system. He analyzes succinctly and clearly the various aspects of the healthcare industry, then recommends changes to the current system. The US spends much more on healthcare than other industrialized countries for no better overall results. In most of the developed world, universal healthcare coverage is standard. To develop a healthcare system that covers everyone and provides good quality care at a cost we can afford to live with, we need to change not only our system of insuring and paying for healthcare, but also the way we organize and deliver that care.

Relman correctly identifies and criticizes the universally negative role of the commercialization of healthcare in its various manifestations: for-profit hospitals, for-profit health insurers, and procedure-based reimbursement for physicians. His recommended solution of a single payment and single insurance system that is funded primarily through federal taxes and administered by a centralized federal government entity has good potential of success since it is based on already existing systems like the Securities and Exchange Commission. The key to the new delivery system will be development of prepaid multispecialty groups where physicians are paid largely by salary (thus having much less incentive to over- or underuse resources). This system could achieve universal coverage without adding costs; combined savings could easily

amount to at least 30% of present expenses—more than enough to pay for those now uninsured. Relman’s overall reform proposal has the potential to succeed because under the proposed universal system, money now spent on health insurance would be pooled, redirected to an efficient central insurer, and distributed to a largely not-for-profit system for medical care.

Overall, Relman’s book provides timely and important insights into the current healthcare system’s problems and a solid, practical proposal for reform. Anyone interested in healthcare and policy reform should consider this text as a ‘must-read’ in order to be better appraised of an issue looming on the horizon of America’s future.