

ObamaCare – The Spruce Goose

I was guardedly optimistic of President Obama’s latest overture to Republicans to join him in crafting a workable health care reform initiative. Then, the bombshell fell. The discussion must center on the two existing versions of Obamacare, i.e., the “Spruce Goose” prototypes for health care reform.

I picture Obama as Howard Hughes before a Senate hearing in 1947 defending the Spruce Goose, saying, “Now, I put the sweat of my life into this thing. I have my reputation all rolled up in it...” He appropriately stresses the serious health system and economic problems we face and how Obamacare incorporates many principles most Americans embrace, e.g., insurance reform, expanded coverage, to address them.

Hughes teamed up with industrialist Henry J. Kaiser, who successfully directed the Liberty ship program, to construct a “flying boat” that could transport a huge payload of personnel and equipment to the European Theater of Operation without the threat of being sunk by German U-boats. Both were extremely intelligent, well intentioned and accomplished individuals who had the courage, creativity and resolve to tackle a major problem confronting the Nation. The design principles underlying the Spruce Goose prototypes addressed serious issues America faced.

The Spruce Goose and the hangar, in which it was constructed, rest in Oregon and California, respectively, as historic museum pieces. The five story, eight engine, birch constructed, behemoth, with a wingspan of over 100 yards, flew one time at 70 feet elevation for about one mile. It was hardly capable of transporting 750 fully-equipped troops or a tank for a sustained distance of several thousand miles, as envisioned in the principles. However, for years Hughes insisted it was air-worthy and maintained it in a climate controlled hangar.

Obama contends that constructive critics of his plan object to the political atmosphere within which it was created, not the principles and design specifications underlying it. He is right regarding the distaste for the atmosphere and embrace of the principles. However, he ignores the legitimate concerns over serious design flaws that evoked criticism and led to the unsavory atmosphere.

Improving health status is a complex matter involving the contributions and interdependency of science, culture, economics, politics, system organization, practitioner mix and supply and a host of other factors that come together – or not - at each local delivery setting. Patients, the public, politicians, health practitioners and institutions all play a major role. Central policies and programs influence health status and delivery but often in a different manner or magnitude in different settings. For example, Massachusetts has successfully realized the principle of expanded coverage but not the principles of reduced emergency room visits, greatly expanded ambulatory preventive care or cost-containment.

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To move forward constructively, Obama is correct that we need to focus on shared principles most of us embrace. However, this requires a fresh start, not a limited discussion of the missing or flawed design specifications of the “Spruce Goose”.

James D. Felsen

(I am a board certified public health physician with over 40 years of experience in community public health programs and author of the book, De-Spamming Health - Reforming the Health System from the Bottom Up. I was Health Officer of Kanawha County from March 2000 – January 2003.)