

De-Spamming Health- Reforming the Health System from the Bottom Up SYNOPSIS

Nearly everyday, newspapers and television feature accounts of scientific discoveries and applied medical research that further contribute to the ongoing, rapid advancement of health care, making it the best ever. At the same time, there are almost as many stories decrying the deficiencies, disintegration, and dysfunction of the health care system, further plunging it into crisis. Most citizens are delighted with advances that have greatly improved the quality and longevity of their lives. Few, including those who toil in the health care vineyard, are happy with the system.

Some attribute this paradoxical situation to the inevitable results of scientific progress, whereby the current scope, intensity, and sophistication of health interventions make them expensive and difficult to integrate and coordinate in an effective and efficient manner. The author accepts the contention that such progress contributes to the challenge. He rejects the premise the results are inevitable or that scientific progress is necessarily the most important factor contributing to health system disarray and dysfunction. He contends the situation is largely due to the unintended consequence of the loss of individual and local community autonomy and system integration capacity over the past half century.

Forty years ago, the author discarded plans to enter a medical clinical specialty upon his discovery of the enormous power and potential of community public health. This occurred while he served as the medical/health director for several remote Native

American villages within Arizona. He anticipated that continuing advances in microbiology, immunology, genetics, pharmacology, and other medical fields, along with the astounding progress occurring within the field of health informatics and related “integrating” technologies, assured that the golden age of community public health was around the corner.

The author shares many experiences, discoveries, and stories from his forty-year journey through all levels of the health care system from a primary care physician making house calls on horseback at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, to serving as Staff Director for the Office of the Surgeon General. These recollections include exciting, passionate, and positive examples of growth, promise, success, and potential. They also include the observations and analysis of sobering, depressing, and negative developments of a political, organizational, social, economic, and related nature that insidiously and invidiously contribute to health system decline. He concludes that more centrally dictated financing and associated reform initiatives would not fix the system, citing Albert Einstein’s admonition that, “We cannot solve the problems we have created with the same thinking that created them”.

Finally, the author provides an approach for individuals and local communities to reassert their autonomy and reclaim ownership of their community health care system so that we can realize the enormous potential he envisioned four decades ago.

Jim Felsen, MD, MPH