

By Dr Victor Van Hee

## Michael Moore's SiCKO – Another Heroic Failure?



Despite his ability to make some of the most accessible and stirring documentaries that demand viewers to take political action, Michael Moore's movies have yet to move Americans to change. Years after we learned about the individual human pain and suffering caused by corporations in *Roger and Me* and *The Big One*, corporate America continues to receive broad support from Americans, even as it exploits workers and continues to value profits over people. *Bowling for Columbine's* frightening glimpse into America's culture of gun ownership and violence did not do anything to prevent just about any American from easily purchasing an assault rifle. Despite the scathing commentary on the Bush administration of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, George W Bush was re-elected for a second term, and the Iraq war continues today. Michael Moore regularly presents a need for change in such a way that no reasonable person could disagree with his conclusions, and each time Americans fail to enact change.

But none of these failures have stopped Michael Moore from making yet another excellent documentary that provides compelling arguments for political change. This time, he has set his sights on another easy, but very deserving, target – America's healthcare system. He again demonstrates his ability to make politics interesting, even entertaining, to the average American by letting us meet the villains and the heroes that make, or are maimed by, those policies. This time, he even goes so far as to implicitly call for a revolution (and we hear the Rolling Stones classic "Street Fighting Man"). Despite these well-told stories of Americans dying because of the health insurance system and happy Europeans and Cubans living long and healthy lives because of their universal

coverage, we have to wonder if this will be yet another heroic failure.

In *SiCKO*, we meet Americans who could easily be our patients – and every American doctor can tell at least one story about a patient failing to get needed treatment because of lack of sufficient insurance. We meet a middle-aged, insured couple forced to sell their home and move in with their children because of an endless barrage of copays and deductibles. He has had three myocardial infarctions, she has cancer. The bills have left them with nothing. We meet an 82-year-old man forced to continue working a low wage job at a supermarket to pay for medications. We meet a long list of Americans denied coverage by HMOs for potentially life-saving treatments. We meet Americans who have died after being denied coverage. Michael Moore introduces us to a group of 9/11 rescue workers who cannot get adequate healthcare for conditions related to their service after the disaster. All of these individuals are the heroes of *SiCKO*, and Michael Moore takes them on a literal and symbolic quest to overcome the healthcare policies of America in a boat ride to Cuba.

We meet non-American heroes, too, in the doctors of France (who even make house calls!) and Britain and Cuba, a passionate and articulate British socialist, and even a government-employed French maid who does laundry and cooks food for mothers who recently gave birth. As in all Michael Moore's films, *SiCKO* is strongest when it takes us deep into the lives of individuals and shows us their overwhelming pain and their small joys.

*SiCKO's* main weakness lies in its lack of human villains with faces – its villains are primarily faceless HMOs, intangible. We do get another classic, unbelievable quote from Michael Moore's



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◀ Page 28 – Michael Moore’s *SiCKO* – Another Heroic Failure?

favourite villain, George W Bush (something about obstetric gynaecologists not being able to “practise their love with women”), a clip of Ronald Reagan, and some stock video footage of a medical director of an HMO, but we do not get a personal interview that takes us into the psyche of the villains of the American healthcare system. We do not get *Bowling for Columbine*’s interviews with McDonnell Douglass executives or Charlton Heston, or *Roger and Me* and *The Big One*’s meetings with CEOs and Senators. Perhaps Michael Moore has become too popular for his own good – the villains are wary.

*SiCKO* does not cover the entire American healthcare system. It does not even attempt to explain the complexities of Medicare, PPOs, HMOs,

or the multitude of reasons for rising healthcare costs in America. It focuses little on the uninsured. It is difficult to fault Michael Moore for simplifying something so complicated as American healthcare because there are many Americans and even many American physicians, who have difficulty comprehending the system. Michael Moore chooses the difficult, sometimes tragic, situations that make his point: Because America does not have universal healthcare, these tragedies could happen to anyone.

*SiCKO* is not surprising, and its villains are not as compelling as in Michael Moore’s prior works, but it is a story well told by an American who deeply cares for the everyday Americans who are his heroes. We can only hope that it is not still another heroic failure. ■