

By Dr Hsu Liyang, Editorial Board Member



SICKO

– A Review

In his controversial film *SiCKO*, Michael Moore directs his camera and formidable (if lopsided) attention on the US healthcare system. There is little that has not been said about this documentary – since its debut on 19 May 2007 at the Cannes Film Festival, you can find hundreds of reviews in print and online media, including a perspective piece in the August issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine*¹.

Primarily a documentary about the ills of managed healthcare and healthcare insurance in the US, the first part of the movie details this via interviews with both insured and uninsured individuals who have suffered as a consequence of the system, whereas the second part accentuates the issues by contrasting it with rose-tinted (and arguably blinkered) appraisals of countries with universal and equitable health coverage.

It is hard not to be horrified by the initial vignettes. I am particularly struck by Dawnelle Keys' story – her 18-month-old daughter died from an infection in 1993 because her insurance coverage did not include the emergency facility to which her daughter was transferred, and the doctors could not obtain the authorisation to administer potentially life-saving antibiotics. This seems surreal and perhaps even criminal from a Singaporean perspective, where I am sure our ED doctors would have treated first and left others to quibble with the S\$70 (or is it S\$90 now?) charge and hospitalisation fees.

Just as he “failed” to mention the cutting-edge medical care that one can find in the US (our current Prime Minister also sought American expert opinion in 1992 after developing lymphoma), Michael Moore similarly “failed” to develop on the issues with the universal “free” health coverage provided by European countries and Canada, brushing aside questions of long waiting times, poorer remuneration, and higher taxes almost cursorily. The Cuban segment, where

he brought New York 9/11 volunteers sidelined by the system to Cuba for treatment, was particularly over the top.

Nonetheless, the underlying message and basic truth of the accusations levelled in the documentary are undeniable and very effectively conveyed. The US healthcare system is in bad need of a reform, and some sort of proposal to address this is a plank in every 2008 US presidential candidate's platform. Still, the way forward is not very clear, with powerful interest groups and lobbyists campaigning to either limit changes to the status quo or advance their positions. Michael Moore's final plea to adopt a universal health system, as Americans adopt better wines or cars from abroad, will almost certainly fall on deaf ears.

Does this documentary have any relevance for us in Singapore? One could argue yes, if only because of the constant need to appraise our own healthcare system and values. We enjoy excellent healthcare access and outcomes at relatively low expenditures (3.7% of GDP in 2004). However, our repugnance and wariness of moral hazard has led to a system where, beyond a basic (albeit high) “Corolla” level, access is not equitable. Our positioning as a medical hub and the development of academic medical centres may, if not carefully managed, lead us to become more like the US in both desirable and undesirable ways, further widening the “Lexus” and “Corolla” gap.

All rhetoric aside, this is certainly one of the more compelling and entertaining documentaries ever produced, and will strike a deep chord in all viewers because of the fundamental importance of health. Do watch the movie, and enjoy!

Reference:

1. Hacker JS. Healing our SICKO healthcare system. *The New England Journal of Medicine*. 2007;357:733-5.



Dr Hsu Li Yang is currently based at the older medical school in Singapore, where his preoccupation with drug-proof bugs prevents a closer acquaintance with worms and other fields of interest.