

The Winter of Our Discontent



There have been worse winters in our country's history than the one just passed, but the lingering aftermath of the 2008-2009 economic recession and the inability of our government to enact a comprehensive health care policy after a year have left many of us with a greater sense of helplessness and hopelessness than is typical for this time of year.

For me as a New Yorker, the approaching winter season was unofficially heralded by a promising sign: the Yankees reclaiming the baseball world championship for the first time since the year before the World Trade Center was destroyed. But it has been downhill ever since, with devastating earthquakes in Haiti and other countries, elected officials in the US self-destructing at an alarming rate, too little snow for the Olympics in the Canadian Rockies, and too much snow in the Northeast—the latter accompanied by record snow jobs from Washington, particularly with respect to health care reform.

Last September, I wrote about the pending health care legislation with the expectation that I would revisit the subject shortly, once its final form became clear. Six months later, with the majority of legislators needed to ensure passage eroding, it is even less certain what, if anything, we will

ultimately end up with. Among the provisions that appear to have come and gone are the “public option” to purchase health insurance from the government rather than from private insurance companies, low-cost imported pharmaceuticals, and a way to pay for all of it—with a current proposal to defer new taxes until 2018.

Predictions about the likelihood of quick passage of meaningful health care reform probably most closely resemble this year's Groundhog Day forecasts: The Pennsylvania groundhog saw his shadow and ran for cover—predicting 6 more weeks of winter, while the New York City groundhog saw no shadow, thereby predicting an early spring. Though the New York City groundhog was proven wrong when the snow began to fall only a few days later, at least he was smart enough not to bite the mayor's finger this year as he did in the past. Probably an even more apt analogy to the health care debate can be found in the movie *Groundhog Day*, in which Phil the weatherman is destined to live that day over and over again until he finally gets it right.

At the same time the national debate continued in starts and stops throughout the winter on its way to its denouement, the beginning of 2010 seems to have been characterized by increases in health insurance *premiums*—instead of

increases in health insurance coverage—along with increases in copays and deductibles. Perhaps coincidental, though seemingly related, was a dramatic increase in the number of scheduled surgeries in early and mid-December, creating long waits in emergency departments for nonsurgical patients in need of inpatient beds.

It is little wonder, then, that early signs of spring were eagerly sought and shared: Baseball

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pitchers and catchers reported for spring training in mid-February, remaining players arrived a week later, and the first spring training games were scheduled for March 2. I sometimes think that the job most similar to chief of emergency medicine is that of manager of a major league baseball team, but I suspect that there will be many more balks before the president and Congress finally pitch a viable health care package to the nation. □