



*Dissecting
American
Health Care*

Commentaries on Health, Policy, and Politics

Douglas B. Kamerow, MD

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RTI Press



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RTI International
3040 Cornwallis Road, PO Box 12194, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194 USA
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Introduction

I am a family doctor and preventive medicine specialist. I spent 20 years in the US Public Health Service working in a range of clinical, research, and policy positions, and then 10 years working at RTI International (formerly Research Triangle Institute) focusing on health services evaluations and health policy research. I also teach medical students and family medicine residents at Georgetown University.

Starting in 2007, I began to write short commentaries on health care and health policy for both the international medical journal *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) and the US radio and web network NPR (formerly National Public Radio—are we starting to see a trend to abbreviated names here?). Since then I have been producing an average of about 10 pieces a year. My goal in writing them has been to provide readers and listeners with thoughts and opinions on health-related issues, informed by evidence and experience. I also aimed to be interesting, provocative, and even entertaining.

The topics of the 47 essays included in this book are sometimes serious and sometimes lighthearted. They range from AIDS to screening tests for cancer to whether hair and nails grow after death. Not surprisingly, I have tended to write on subjects I know a bit about, hence an emphasis on primary care and preventive medicine. That has not stopped me from commenting on other areas, however, and so there are essays on ethics, genetics, and religion. In all cases I tried hard get my facts straight before the pontifications began. (Speaking of pontifications, there is a piece about the pope as well.)

Because of the word limits necessary to fit onto a single medical journal page or into a typical 3-minute radio commentary, these are very short pieces. Whether this constraint has led to clear, concise writing that gets to the point quickly, or to superficial generalizations that only skim the surface of a topic, I leave to the reader's judgment.

The only thing these commentaries have in common is that they are all related to health or health care in some way. In retrospect, most were written in reaction to political events—an election or health reform—or

policy pronouncements, such as a new screening test recommendation or an Institute of Medicine report. As I compiled them for this book I thought they fell fairly logically into five broad topic areas:

These last few years have been a boom time for evidence-based medicine, health care quality measurement, and quality improvement strategies. Essays in Section 1 focus on what works and what does not work in health care and how we can tell them apart.

Almost everyone thinks (wrongly) that virtually any kind of preventive medicine will save both lives and money. As a result, the early 21st century has been full of news and noise about clinical preventive services: screening tests, immunizations, and behavioral counseling. This is an area that I am dangerously knowledgeable about, and the second group of essays alternately praises and debunks trends in preventive care.

The US presidential campaign and election of 2008 fell right in the middle of this period. It provided delightful candidates and infuriating issues (or was it infuriating candidates and delightful issues?) to discuss and dissect. Section 3 focuses on politics and its intersection with health and health care. In it are profiles of interesting characters and discussions of soapbox issues like saving both primary care medicine and the surgeon general's purity.

When we look back on this period at mid-century, US health reform will no doubt be held up as a signal accomplishment—or failure. The US nonsystem of health care, with its perverse incentives and outrageous spending, has increasingly dominated the news in recent years. Section 4 is about the ups and downs of trying to change the way we deliver and pay for health care.

Although each of these short essays is an opinion piece, I have tried to keep myself out of the center of most of them. Sometimes, however, a personal experience became the backbone of the essay or seemed to introduce a subject well. These more personal pieces are grouped together with a few that deal with ethical issues in Section 5 at the end of the book. Forewarned is forearmed.

Within sections, the commentaries are sequenced chronologically, and the date originally published or broadcast is included at the top of each. This allows the reader to put date references such as “in January” or “on June 1” into context. It also reveals occasions when my crystal ball has been particularly cloudy, as when I gloomily predicted on January 30, 2010, that

health care reform was doomed, less than 2 months before it passed and was signed into law. I have left these failed predictions as they were originally written.

All the essays are also labeled with their original source—NPR or *BMJ*. Because those written for the *BMJ* were styled for a medical journal, I have occasionally added footnotes to them to clarify medical or epidemiologic terms that might not be obvious to the general reader. Many of the sources I used in preparing these essays and all of the works I mention in the pieces themselves can be found in a bibliography at the end of the book.

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About the Author

Douglas Kamerow is a family physician and a specialist in preventive medicine. After graduating from Harvard College, the University of Rochester Medical School, and Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, he spent 20 years in the Commissioned Corps of the US Public Health Service. In the PHS he worked as a general practitioner in the National Health Service Corps, as a researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health, and in health policy and leadership positions at both the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health and at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. He retired from the PHS in 2001 with the rank of Assistant Surgeon General.

Since then, Dr. Kamerow has been a chief scientist at the nonpartisan research institute RTI International, an editor of the international medical journal *BMJ*, and a professor at Georgetown University, where he teaches medical students and family medicine residents. Starting in 2007, he wrote the health and health care commentaries in this book, which appeared first in the *BMJ* or on National Public Radio (NPR).

Dr. Kamerow lives in Washington, DC, with his wife, Celia Shapiro, and their three almost-grown children.

Former Assistant Surgeon General Douglas Kamerow, a family doctor, journal editor, NPR commentator, and chief scientist at RTI International, combines evidence, opinion, and humor in 47 essays from his health policy columns in the medical journal *BMJ* and his nationally broadcast radio commentaries.

“One of the giants of medicine and public health ... takes on the most critical issues we face, with clarity, brevity, and yet depth. I enjoyed reading this book, and so will you.”

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“Dr. Kamerow’s essays are witty, informed, curious, exasperated, provocative, constructive, and just plain human. Kamerow writes in a way that invites general readers to realize that they have a stake here too—that these are their stories as well!”

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