

NATIONAL DISCUSSION AND DEBATE SERIES: HEALTH CARE

Lesson Four: Is Health Care a Right or a Privilege?

Overview:

In recent national polls and surveys, many people have indicated that they would like some form of basic universal health care. What constitutes basic health care? If basic health care is a right, what responsibilities accompany that right? With treatment costs for chronic diseases continuing to rise, does the government have the right to ban unhealthy behaviors such as smoking in exchange for basic coverage? What might universal health insurance look like in the United States? These are some of the essential questions facing health care reformers. Use the following activities to facilitate critical discussion of these essential questions.

Time: Two 45 minute class periods

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Define a right and a privilege.
2. Debate whether health care is a right or a privilege.
3. Determine an appropriate level of government involvement in financing and regulating health care.
4. Determine what should be included in basic health care
5. Compare the U.S. model of health care to other nations

Materials:

- [U.S. vs. Other Nations](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/health/uninsured/international.html) chart
(http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/health/uninsured/international.html)
- Regulating Health worksheet
- Health care Reform worksheet
- [If You Ask Maine](http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?id=1506) article (optional)
(<http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?id=1506>)

Procedure:

1. Divide the board into two columns: Rights and Privileges. Ask students to define a right and to brainstorm examples of rights. Then ask students to define a privilege and to brainstorm examples of privileges. What is the difference between a right and a privilege?

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2. Designate one side of the room as a “right” and the other as a “privilege.” Ask students the following question and instruct them to go to the side of the room that corresponds with their answer. Is access to health care a right or a privilege? Ask students from each side to explain their reasoning.
3. Many people have indicated in national polls and surveys that they agree with some form of basic health insurance for all U.S. citizens. What constitutes basic health insurance? Should any available treatment be offered to everyone or do you have to draw the line? Should there be any out of pocket costs or should the government pay for all treatment? Read the following cases and ask students whether they consider the treatment in the case to be a right or a privilege. Instruct students to go to the side of the room that corresponds with their answer. After you read each case, call on students from each side to explain their reasoning. When you are finished with the exercise, ask students to share insights or questions they have.
 - Jim breaks his leg and requires a cast.
 - Sarah is due to receive her Polio vaccine.
 - Joe drinks heavily and develops cirrhosis of the liver. He currently needs to be hospitalized to stabilize his condition.
 - Joe would like to enroll in a program to help him treat his alcoholism.
 - Susan has her yearly mammogram and discovers she has breast cancer. The doctors recommend a mastectomy along with chemotherapy.
 - Susan would like reconstructive surgery after her mastectomy.
 - Sharon has had difficulty getting pregnant and would like to try in vitro fertilization to help her conceive.
 - Sharon is pregnant and would like to receive pre-natal care and counseling.
 - Sharon would like to have her child at home with a midwife.
 - Kara, who has smoked for twenty years, has lung cancer. The doctors recommend surgery and chemotherapy.
 - James is morbidly obese. He would like to receive gastric bypass surgery to help him lose weight.
 - Jenny is depressed and is on several antidepressants. She would like to see a psychiatrist to help her with her depression.
 - Jordan has diabetes and requires daily insulin monitoring. He needs an insulin pump and other equipment.
4. How does the U.S. system compare to health care systems in other industrial countries? Use the [U.S. vs. Other Nations](#) chart on the NewsHour Web site to guide students through an overview of health care in other nations. Ask students whether each country profiled views health care as a right or a privilege. Instruct them to support their answer with information from the chart.

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5. If the federal government does fund some form of basic insurance for everyone, does the government then have the right to intervene in lifestyle decisions? For example, chronic conditions resulting from unhealthy behaviors cost billions of dollars to treat. Does the government, then, have the right to ban certain unhealthy behaviors or products such as cigarettes, French fries, or soda? Distribute or post the “Regulating Health” handout. Complete individually or as a class. Call on students to explain their answers.
6. Divide students into small groups. Distribute the Health Care Reform worksheet. Read the overview as a class. [If you have more time, read the full article as a class: [If You Ask Maine.](#)]
7. When all groups are finished, a group representative will present the group’s plan to the class. Write group recommendations on the board. After all groups have presented, develop a class plan. Submit the class plan to your state and local leaders.

Regulating Health

Overview: In the absence of a national consensus about health care reform, many cities have taken the lead in providing health care and protecting their residents’ health and welfare. For example, San Francisco provides universal health access for its residents, while New York and Chicago ban unhealthy ingredients, such as trans fat, or unhealthy behaviors such as smoking. What is the government’s role in regulating healthy and unhealthy behavior, especially if the government bears the financial responsibility for health care? It is a fine balance between personal freedom and the government’s responsibility to provide for the health and welfare of the majority of its citizens. Have these local governments gone too far?

Directions: Read the issues below, then circle the statement with which you agree. Be prepared to defend your reasoning!

The Issue: Trans fat, used to fry many common foods such as French fries and doughnuts, raises cholesterol levels, clogs arteries, and increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. In 2006, New York City passed legislation requiring all city restaurants to eliminate trans fat by July 2008, creating an uproar in the restaurant industry. Restaurants may still serve fried foods, but they will have to find healthier frying oils if they want to continue to operate in New York City. Has New York City gone too far in trying to legislate people’s diets or is the city government fulfilling its responsibility to protect its residents’ health and welfare?

New York City should ban trans fat:

New York City should not ban trans fat:

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The Issue: In 2007, San Francisco began its Healthy San Francisco Plan, designed to provide health care for all San Francisco citizens, including an estimated 82,000 uninsured. Under the plan, all uninsured residents can seek care at the city's public and private clinics and hospitals. The basic coverage, which is about access to health care rather than health insurance, includes lab work, prescriptions, x-rays, surgery, and preventative care. The city plans to pay for this \$203 million coverage by rerouting the \$104 million the city currently spends treating the uninsured in emergency rooms, mandating business contributions, and requiring income-adjusted enrollment fees. The plan requires all businesses with more than 20 employees to contribute a percentage toward the plan, a mandate many area business owners consider too burdensome. Some business owners warn that businesses will not stay in the city if the plan is approved. The mayor, however, sees universal health access as a moral obligation for the city.

San Francisco has an obligation to provide its citizens with health access:

San Francisco does not have an obligation to provide its citizens with health access:

The Issue: San Francisco, which currently funds a health access program that guarantees basic health care for all its residents, passed legislation in March 2008 that requires chain restaurants to post nutritional information on their menus. The legislation is designed to help people make informed decisions about healthy eating and aims to curb rising obesity and diabetes rates. Opponents say that menu labeling will not change people's eating habits, and is an unfair burden to restaurants.

San Francisco should require chain restaurants to post nutrition information:

San Francisco should not require chain restaurants to post nutrition information:

The Issue: In 2008, Chicago banned smoking in all public places, including bars, restaurants, beaches, and parks. The bans are designed to protect people from the negative health effects of secondhand smoke. Opponents of the plan believe that the government does not have the right to interfere with a business owner's choice to regulate smoking in his or her own establishment.

Chicago should ban smoking:

Chicago should not ban smoking:

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Health Care Reform

Overview:

In 2005, Maine faced a health care crisis: 12% of Maine residents were uninsured, and 38% paid more than 5% of their income for insurance. The legislature turned to its citizens for help. In May 2005, the state government hosted a forum called Tough Choices, which asked citizens to sort through several health care options and to develop possible funding options for the state health program. The state listened and developed DirigoChoice, a state insurance program targeted at small businesses, sole proprietors, and un- or underinsured individuals. It offers benefits including prescriptions, preventative care, and sliding-scale discounts for those with household incomes under 300 percent of the federal poverty level.

Scenario:

Your city is hosting the next Tough Choices forum. Use the guiding questions below to develop your own health care reform package that you will present at the forum.

Questions:

- Do you believe access to health care is a right or a privilege?
- Who will be covered by your health plan?
- Is your plan an access plan (meaning that everyone eligible will have access to basic services within a certain area) or an insurance plan (meaning that individuals will have insurance that entitles them to basic services at both in-plan and out-of-plan service providers)?
- What, if any, preventative services will be included?
- What basic health services will be included?
- What, if any, services will people be expected to pay out of pocket?
- How will you encourage healthy behavior?
- How will you discourage unhealthy behavior?
- How will your plan be financed?
- What financial responsibility will businesses have? What financial responsibility will individuals have? What financial responsibility will the government have?

Other thoughts, insights, or ideas:

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