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Our Health Care Crisis: Age, Obesity, Lawyers

Written by Rich Karlgaard

This is how President Obama should start a speech on health care--"My fellow Americans: We are old. We are fat. We are afraid of lawyers."

Our PC President would never begin a speech like that. But with his polls plummeting, maybe he should. I think the country is in the mood for such straight talk.

--**We are old.** Here are the facts about so-called mandatory entitlement spending in the U.S.: Out of a typical year's federal budget about half goes to transfer payments of various sorts--Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment compensation, disability programs, etc. Together Social Security and Medicare suck up nearly \$1 trillion annually and, because of the country's aging boomer population, are the fastest-growing part of the entitlement pie.

--**We are fat.** Here are the alarming facts about obesity in the U.S.: Nearly one-third (31%) of Americans are clinically obese (Body Mass Index of 30 or more).

According to American Sports Data, "3.8 million people are over 300 pounds, over 400,000 people (mostly males) carry over 400 pounds, and the average adult female weighs an unprecedented 163 pounds!"

Obesity leads to a legion of ills, from heart attacks and strokes to gut cancers and diabetes. The annual cost of treating diabetes and its effects exceeds \$200 billion. This number is sure to grow. Adult onset diabetes is of epidemic proportions in some communities and has reached down to hit teenagers, the vast majority of them overweight and underexercised. President Obama should borrow a page from John F. Kennedy and commit our public schools to vigorous fitness goals. And parents: Stop driving your kids to school! Buy a computer game called "Go Outside and Play."

--**We are afraid of lawyers.** The biggest cost is not malpractice awards, which annually drive up U.S. health care costs by 1% to 2%--\$20 billion to \$40 billion a year--although that's bad enough. Most costly is the individual doctor's perceived threat of a career-ending malpractice award and his or her incentive, therefore, to practice defensive medicine. This occurs when a doctor, fearing a lawsuit, orders a battery of costly diagnostic tests to rule out the highly improbable, even when the obvious cause of sickness or injury is staring him in the face.

A Massachusetts Medical Society study discovered that in one year Massachusetts

wasted \$1.4 billion on defensive medicine. Prorated for the entire U.S. population, the cost would be about \$66 billion a year. Another study cited by the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons puts the cost of defensive medicine much higher-- \$100 billion to \$178 billion per year. I believe it.

Two years ago I took my limping son, then age 11 and who had been injured in a flag football game, to an orthopedist who prescribed \$14,000 in brain and spine scans to rule out a brain tumor. Brain tumor? I witnessed the crackback block on the football field that caused my son's injury. The doctor admitted that a brain tumor was an extremely remote possibility. She didn't admit that her real motivation for ordering the scans was to cover her behind.

Age, obesity and defensive medicine are the trillion-dollar elephants in the room. Whether your preference for health care reform springs from the political left or right, you have to start with these three facts. Otherwise, you're just a political bloviator.

If you want to learn more about market-based solutions to our health care cost crisis, go to the National Center for Policy Analysis (ncpa.org) and read anything written by John Goodman, Ph.D.

Global Warming Arrogance

Last month I spent a night at the University of California Alumni Camp's Lair of the

Golden Bear, Camp Gold. (My wife is a UC, Davis grad.)

The guest lecturer on Sunday night was Daniel Kammen, an energy professor at UC, Berkeley. I knew his lecture would be ... revealing. It was. For an hour Professor Kammen swigged from a Corona beer and issued dire climate-change warnings, such as: "Enjoy your camping now, people, because the Sierra forests will be burned up by 2050 ... Greenland's ice cap will melt ... The oceans will rise 21 feet. ... "For an hour Professor Kammen went on about the end of the world as we know it.

Oh, and the politics. Like a teen who swerves down the road hitting mailboxes, Professor Kammen dinged "selfish" Republicans and "ignorant" Red Staters as often as he could. I counted a dozen disses. The professor is still hot about Ronald Reagan's removing Jimmy Carter's solar panels on the White House roof in 1986. Even Canadians were torched by the professor's scorn: "Canadians must give up their tar sands and go back to making beer, or whatever."

It must be said that Professor Kammen's lecture was not geared toward scientists or policymakers. He assumed he was giving it to an after-dinner audience of like-minded Cal alums. Professor Kammen thus revealed how the hard eco-left really talks when it knows its words will go unchallenged.