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'Sicko' film is set to spark debate

By John Dorschner

With everyone from General Motors execs to presidential candidates demanding major changes in America's healthcare, Michael Moore's *Sicko* is opening today in South Florida at the perfect moment to spark an intense debate.

A reform group, Healthcare for All Florida, plans to distribute leaflets and ask moviegoers at some theaters to sign petitions demanding universal coverage because the present system leaves more than 45 million without insurance -- people who often end up in emergency rooms, where their expenses ultimately get passed to taxpayers or those who have insurance.

One member of the group, however, René Rodriguez, a Cuban-born physician who supports major reforms, plans to protest at a theater because he objects to the film's ending, idealizing Cuba's socialistic healthcare.

As with all of his documentaries, the Academy Award-winning Moore's portrait of healthcare is far from neutral. The movie includes details that even some sympathizers consider

exaggerations, and conservatives are lambasting his glowing portrait of government-financed healthcare in other countries.

Still, many who have studied healthcare problems are impressed. "*Sicko* got a lot of the little things wrong," writes Jonathan Cohn, author of *Sick*, a 2006 analysis of the industry. "But it got most of the big things right."

The key for Moore, as it is with most experts, is that the United States is the only industrialized nation that doesn't offer universal coverage. Tens of billions are spent by the government and private insurers just to make sure persons are eligible for care. That's one reason why the United States spends about twice as much per capita on healthcare as other major Western countries, but Americans don't live as long.

In *Sicko*, Moore shows a hospital dumping uninsured patients on Skid Row in Los Angeles, a woman who was denied insurance because she once had a simple yeast infection and a mother whose baby dies because she went to

an emergency room not in her insurer's network.

These kind of horror stories are told frequently to reporters at newspapers around the United States, but John Goodman, a conservative health expert, dismisses them as merely "left-wing politics, healthcare altruism and Hollywood."

Goodman points out that the film is utterly anecdotal. "There is no attempt to objectively compare the merits and demerits of different healthcare systems. There are no interviews with any health policy experts."

In one emotion-charged *Sicko* anecdote, Linda Peeno, a physician who once worked for Humana, tells a Congressional committee that she made a decision to deny a Humana member treatment for a heart transplant -- a decision that cost the patient his life but saved the company \$500,000.

It turns out that this story is an old one. Humana told The Miami Herald that Peeno worked for the insurer for 10 months in 1987. "She was asked by a hospital doctor

whether the member's plan covered heart transplants. Since the member's employer had not purchased heart transplant coverage, she correctly answered no. The member was discharged from the hospital and lived at least another two years."

'UNACCEPTABLE'

Even so, Humana -- like every major player in the healthcare industry -- agrees that the U.S.'s system has fundamental problems. "We believe it is unacceptable that millions of Americans lack access to quality, affordable healthcare coverage," the insurer said in an e-mail statement.

But what should be done? Moore points to the government-run systems in Canada, the UK and France.

After quickly listing conservative complaints about socialized medicine in Canada, particularly long waits for services and surgeries, Moore bubbles: "Nothing we were told about the Canadian system was true." He says Canada's system is "fabulous."

In fact, Gerard Anderson, a Johns Hopkins health policy professor who has spent his career examining the world's healthcare, said there are delays, but not as many as conservatives state.

In Canada, the United Kingdom and France, "three percent of hospital discharges had delays in treatment," Anderson told *The Miami Herald*. "That's a relatively

small number, and they're all elective surgeries, such as hip and knee replacement."

For those awaiting surgery, "that obviously creates anxiety, and it makes people very unhappy, but it's not clinically dangerous," Anderson said. "It's a huge political issue, and the waiting list waxes and wanes. Close to election time, the list goes down," because governments pump money into the system, "and after the elections they rise again."

In *Sicko*, Moore lauds the French system, in which doctors make midnight house calls and government workers go to the homes of new moms to do the laundry -- "free!" chortles Moore.

SOARING COSTS

The truth is the French are now struggling to pay for their healthcare costs, and it was an issue in their recent presidential election. The socialists lost, partly because they proposed funding soaring healthcare costs by increasing by 5 percentage points the value-added tax that is hidden in what consumers pay for goods and services.

In fact, though Moore doesn't mention it in *Sicko*, all industrialized nations are struggling with soaring costs, due to new technologies and aging populations.

Virtually all experts say any reform of the American system must include ways to cut costs so that the country can afford to cover the uninsured -- and

that means cutting unnecessary treatments.

The final 22 minutes of the two-hour movie are devoted to Moore taking Americans to Cuba for treatment. One paid the equivalent of five cents at a pharmacy for an inhaler that costs about \$120 in the United States. "There seems to be a doctor on every block," Moore tells viewers.

In fact, repeated stories in *The Miami Herald* have related how Cuban pharmacies lack many drugs and patients rely on their relatives in Miami to send them to them. Earlier this year, Darsi Ferrer, a dissident doctor in Havana, said in a telephone interview that because so many Cuban physicians have been sent to Venezuela and other countries, "one doctor now has to take care of four or five offices."

"I totally agree we need healthcare reform," says Rodriguez, the Miami physician, "but this movie is very biased."

Another subject that the obviously overweight director Moore doesn't bring up is that many U.S. experts are now saying that the best way to live longer and cut healthcare costs is simply diet and exercise.

Still, at some point during the making of *Sicko*, that message may have gotten through to Moore, for buried in the small-type credits at the end is a bit of advice: "Eat your fruits and vegetables and go for a walk."