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## 'Sicko' touches sore spots

By Jason Roberson

Michael Moore's movie *Sicko* opened in local theaters Friday, but the debate over what it says about the nation's health care system was already in full swing.

**Devon Herrick, a Dallas health economist and co-author of *Lives at Risk: Single-Payer National Health Insurance Around the World*, said Mr. Moore inaccurately portrayed the efficiency of health systems in Canada, the United Kingdom and France when he compared them to the system in the U.S.**

**Citizens of those countries face high taxes and longer waits than Americans for common medical procedures, Mr. Herrick said.**

**"His dry wit is good," said Mr. Herrick, but he committed "errors of omission."**

Meanwhile, Eliot Shavin, 53, of East Dallas, left the 11:10 a.m. showing of *Sicko* at the Angelika Film Center on Mockingbird Lane in agreement with the filmmaker.

"We've become a Third World country when it comes to

health care," said Mr. Shavin, a law professor at Southern Methodist University and consumer attorney who has helped sue insurance companies.

It remains to be seen whether the movie will become as controversial as some of Mr. Moore's other films – such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which questioned President Bush's competence, and *Roger and Me*, a film criticizing the outsourcing of American auto jobs.

It's a safe bet the insurance industry won't feel flattered.

*Sicko* spotlights the problem some Americans have getting insurance companies to pay their medical bills and portrays insurance carriers as too picky of who they will insure.

At one point in the movie, Becky Malke, a call center employee at an undisclosed insurance company, broke into tears while talking about what she called the cruel reality of her job. Ms. Malke said she fields calls daily from people wanting to buy health insurance, knowing they will be denied because of minor issues.

A bigger issue raised by the film is whether insurance companies try to dodge paying for their customers' care.

One California woman profiled in the movie, Tarsha Harris, said she was denied coverage because she once had a yeast infection on her navel.

Ms. Harris said she noticed redness around her bellybutton after completing the Los Angeles Marathon. She saw a doctor and was diagnosed with a common yeast infection; she then used a cream the doctor prescribed to clear it up.

Then, since she didn't have a job or employee coverage, Ms. Harris decided to buy an individual policy with Blue Cross of California.

She said she completed the application, was approved and began paying premiums.

But soon afterward, Ms. Harris started bleeding from her navel. Her doctors ordered surgery and Blue Cross approved the procedure.

Only after the surgery were doctors able to diagnose her with a rare disease:

spontaneous endometriosis of the umbilicus, she said.

Blue Cross rescinded her policy, pulling back the money it had already paid to the doctors and hospital that treated her, she said in the movie. That left Ms. Harris – sick and unemployed – responsible for thousands of dollars of medical bills.

Blue Cross claimed Ms. Harris made a material misrepresentation on her application, saying she should have disclosed her yeast infection.

A spokesman for the insurance company also said Ms. Harris' case has been settled, adding that he thinks she is satisfied with the outcome, although he declined to give details.

"Many of the Americans featured in *Sicko* were not as lucky as Tarsha," said her attorney, Lourdes DeArmas, of the Quisenberry Law Firm in Los Angeles. "They didn't receive the care they needed before the insurance company pulled the financial rug out from under them."

Toward the close of the film, Mr. Moore asked viewers, "Who are we?" as images of health care victims profiled earlier in the movie flashed onto the screen.

"I thought his question was the right question to ask," Mr. Shavin said. "We've lost our compassion."

Others have not been so receptive to Mr. Moore's message.

Weeks before the film opened, some health care activist groups began sending e-mails to journalists disputing Mr. Moore's assessment of America's health care system, as well as the efficiency of systems in other countries.

Bureaucrash, an international activist group based in Washington D.C., along with members of the Americans for Prosperity, and the Moving Picture Institute showed up at a D.C. premiere carrying signs saying, "Socialism Kills," and "Guaranteed health care is a Guaranteed Failure."

Insurance companies called by *The Dallas Morning News* for comment, including CIGNA and Aetna, referred questions to their industry group, America's Health Insurance Plans, based in Washington D.C.

"No one is saying the system is infallible," said Mohit Ghose, an AHIP spokesman.

"Yes, there are mistakes made, but to glibly say the government should take over the system is to do the country a disservice."

Mr. Ghose, whose organization represents 1,300 companies, said that of the millions upon millions of claims filed every year, only 3 percent are denied.

After being denied, a patient still has the option of appealing to an "independent external review" board, he added.

Deciding which claims to pay is not complicated, Mr. Ghose said, adding that two questions must be answered: "Is it covered?" and "Is it an experimental situation?"