



Narrative: Shared American Values, Health Stories, and Fair/Affordable Health Care

What are the sources of shared American values?

The Declaration of Independence begins with the basic principle that “all men [people] are created equal.” The Preamble to the Constitution states that the Constitution’s purpose is to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, *promote the general Welfare*...” The Pledge of Allegiance calls us “one nation ...with liberty and justice for all.” The value of democracy is also widespread in our founding documents, but its best brief description is Lincoln’s phrase “government by the people, of the people and for the people.” All these foundational documents support the idea that in order to fulfill the purposes of our society, we must care for one another, for all of us.

What values describe our American identity?

Liberty, equality, justice, democracy. These are not the only values Americans care about, but they are the most widely shared and the ones that best define our identity *as Americans*.

Have we always acted in accordance with shared American values?

Not always, as history clearly shows us. They were written as aspirations for us as a nation. The culture in which they were written saw many things differently from the way we do today. Slavery was acceptable. Grossly unequal relationships between men and women were viewed as normal. In the three centuries that the United States has existed, we have acknowledged these grave misjudgments, deepened our understanding of our principles, and worked toward making progress in fulfilling these national aspirations. But we have further to go.

What are the different dimensions of the word freedom?

FDR popularized the idea of freedom as freedom “from want and fear.” President Bush took that statement and placed an additional dimension: “by making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny, we will give our fellow American greater freedom from want and fear and make our society more prosperous and just and equal.” These two conceptions of freedom can be combined as they pertain to health care. As health professionals we know that our patients (and/or families) need to be engaged in their own health. But they can do this only if can have freedom “from want and fear.” Applied to health care this means that people want health

insurance coverage that is fair and affordable. By listening to people's stories about their health and then telling our own stories, we can emphasize that all of us must have health care. It is the only way it can be fair and affordable.

How does the Revolving Door in and out of Government Fit into the Idea that the “Business of America is Business.”

Calvin Coolidge in the 1920's uttered this memorable phrase to present an idea about our country. The reality is that, unlike many European countries, in the U.S. most people who work in government come for a relatively brief period of time. Who hires them when they are ready to leave? Organizations that have a direct interest in profiting from health care (pharmaceutical companies and those providing health care) or an interest in minimizing their health care tax obligations (e.g. corporations). All these historical and ideological issues are in tension with the dimension of freedom that encourages universal health insurance coverage.

How do different dimensions of the word freedom tie into the health care debate?

We believe that an essential element of making health care fair is a new national commitment to the principle of universality in health care. To implement this principle effectively, we, as a nation and through our elected political leaders, will have to address our shared American values of liberty, equality, justice (especially economic justice), the role of business in American business and democracy.