Tuesday, November 13, 2007

Last Saturday night, I felt a slight twinge in my hip, which grew into an annoying pain. Before long, every movement fell somewhere between aggravating and excruciating. After a mostly sleepless night, at five in the morning, my wife insisted that I see a doctor.

"It's Sunday," I reminded her through a grimace.

"The local medical center on Commack Road is open on Sundays," she said.

The center opened at 9 a.m. and I hobbled-in at 9:05. Already, the parking lot was full and the waiting room crowded. There was a school teacher grading papers, a toddler in pajamas mesmerized by a giant fish tank, and a young mom who told me she had three kids at home. There were senior citizens, a hearty-looking twenty-something guy in a college sweatshirt. Lastly, there was a judge and her husband, the local Congressman.

This reveals the changing state of health care in America. We went from house calls to the family doctors' office to health centers tucked next to pizza places and Starbucks.

After a reasonable wait, I was led to an exam room. Soon, a young woman in scrubs entered with a stethoscope around her neck. She asked some questions, read my paperwork, carefully examined me, and told me that X-Rays were necessary. She did everything you would expect from a good doctor except that she's not a doctor. She's a PA (Physicians Assistant) - the senior medical professional on duty that Sunday.

In the X-Ray room, a technician joked: "With all the pictures you take everyday, this should be easy for you!"

A few minutes later, the PA provided a diagnosis (tendonitis) and two prescriptions: a painkiller and an anti-inflammatory.

"How many patients will you see today?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened and she exhaled forcefully. "Oh, lots. On a day like this, lots."

"Dozens?" I asked.

She nodded, and repeated, "Lots." She told me she also works in the Emergency Room at Good Samaritan Hospital. "At least there, I know when my shift will end," she said. "Here, I don't leave until the last patient is seen."

My wife wrote a check for my insurance co-pay and we left. By that time, the waiting room was even more crowded than when we arrived. More seniors, more kids, more people in their twenties and thirties.

On both sides of medical care - for the people in the waiting room and for the staff behind the sliding glass partition - changes are occurring. Doctors are opening seven-day a week "Care Centers." Medical professionals are working two jobs. Nurses and Physicians Assistants are assuming greater responsibility for the delivery of care.

For the fortunate among us, many of these changes may be useful. After all, I experienced my first pains at 9 p.m. on Saturday night and by 11 a.m. Sunday morning I had a diagnosis and two prescriptions. Sadly, for 47 million other Americans - including nearly 10 million children and two million veterans - the changes are irrelevant. They don't have the options enjoyed by the people in that waiting room on Commack Road. When they experience sharp pain, they can either live with it or go to the emergency room (thereby placing greater stress on health care costs).

What does that say about a nation that spends more on health care per capita than any other?

It says that on top of the changes I saw on Sunday, we need fundamental reform. Reform that blends the dedication of that hard-working PA, the exquisite technology of the X-Rays, the drugs I was prescribed and a national commitment to affordable, accessible health care for all Americans.