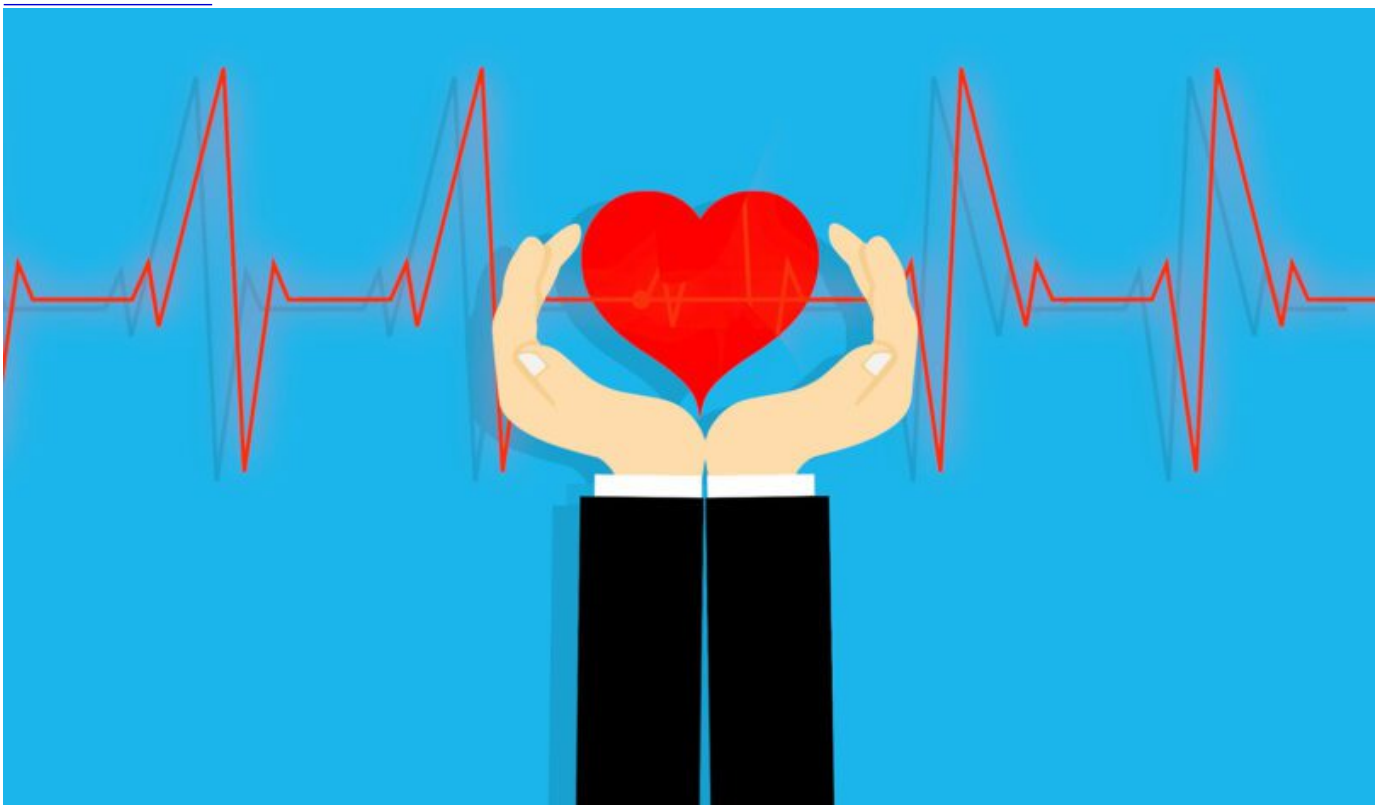
Opinion
Guest Voices



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Good health is something most people take for granted until they get sick, but few things are more important in life. That's why it is a tragic disgrace that health care has become a partisan issue in the United States.

The Democrats are largely concerned about ensuring people have health care coverage but not costs to the government. Some want the government to pay for every procedure for everyone, which is unsustainable.

On the other hand, Republicans are mostly concerned about costs to the government but not health coverage. They believe that the free market will magically control costs and provide health care for everyone. In reality, the free market means the poor don't get health care — they die.

The divide, a key factor in the longest-ever government shutdown that ended a few weeks ago, is now at the heart of an expected Senate vote this week over continuing government subsidies for the Affordable Care Act sought by Democrats, which have made health insurance more affordable for the many Americans covered under the act.

We need to be concerned about both coverage and cost. We need a health care system that is affordable, comprehensive and respects human dignity.

From the beginning of Christianity, love for one's neighbor and the example of Jesus' concern for the sick have compelled Christians to care for the ill and dying. As a result, the Catholic Church has been involved in health care for centuries. In the first hospitals, which were in monasteries, monks and nuns provided care for the sick and dying, especially the poor. The wealthy were taken care of at home.

In the past, medical knowledge was so limited that doctors were likely to speed their patients to their graves with their practices. Disregard for cleanliness also was

deadly for patients.

In modern times, the science of medicine developed exponentially with many medical specialties and advanced technologies now used to fight sickness and disease. The days of a country doctor with a black bag visiting patients at home are gone.

Good health care has become so expensive that the care provided to a well-insured person in the first world is in a different universe from that provided to a poor person in the developing world. I remember a Jesuit missionary coming away from Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C., in tears after seeing what health innovations were available there as compared to the town he served in El Salvador.

And now, rather than improving, the Trump administration's cuts to the United States Agency for International Development and other programs are making matters worse in the developing world.

In the U.S., the difference in medical care available to the rich, the middle class and poor is also stark. We have the best medical care in the world for the rich and the well insured, but the middle class can be bankrupted by a medical emergency.

Medicare has substantially improved health care for the elderly, but even with it, many exhaust their savings in medical expenses before they die.

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Medicaid is supposed to help the poor, but cuts in funding have hurt patients and the hospitals that serve them. Many doctors do not accept Medicaid or limit the number of Medicaid patients they accept.

Meanwhile, the middle class has seen health insurance plans from employers reduced or eliminated.

The American health care system is the most expensive system in the world, costing an average of twice per person what health care costs in other developed nations, and yet it provides less service to the poor and lower-income citizens.

And the fragmented insurance scene is a bureaucratic nightmare for both doctors and patients. A single-payer system would reduce administrative costs and give the government the power to negotiate lower prices with drug companies, doctors and hospitals. Hospitals and doctors could be required to post their fee schedules online to encourage competition.

The government could also be more generous in forgiving student loans of doctors and nurses who serve the poor. It should also fund research and public health that reduce health care costs. Eliminating vaccines and fluoride, which some of our national health leaders seek to do, will simply raise health care costs as preventable illnesses and dental problems could increase.

As a nation, we need to move toward Medicare for All, a tax-funded health care system that includes all medically necessary care. We can start by allowing employers and individuals to buy into Medicare even if they are under 65. We should also start by providing Medicare for All to anyone under 18 years of age, including children in the womb. Investing in children's health is not only morally right but also cost effective for healthier futures.

Such programs will cost the government money, but the current system is both costly and wasteful. A former president of General Motors said the company spent more on health insurance for its employees than on steel for its cars. These costs are passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices.

The current fight in Washington has served one purpose: to tell us all that our health care system is broken. We need to admit that other developed countries have done a better job of caring for their citizens while keeping down costs. We can learn from them.

As Christianity compels us, we need to put aside our arrogance and partisanship on health care and do what is best for the nation and its people. And, if Congress is incapable of reforming the health care system, we should take away their generous health care plan and put them on Medicaid. That should wake them up.