



COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES CAN MONEY BUY LONGEVITY?

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IS THE FOUNTAIN OF youth hidden in the wallets of the wealthy? If that were the case, John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil, would have lived well beyond the normal life expectancy at the time. In fact, he did. Rockefeller passed away at the ripe old age of 97 (in 1937); his net worth was 318.3 billion U.S. \$.ⁱ In the mid-1930s the life expectancy for a male in the United States was 59.9 years.ⁱⁱ Bill Gates, past chairman and principal founder of Microsoft might be smiling at the thought. Because of his wealth, the funeral directors located in Gates's home area of Redmond, Washington, should expect a long wait.

But does the wealth and life expectancy of individual entrepreneurs translate into increased longevity for a nation full of wealthy citizens? Not necessarily.

As a nation, the United States spends more of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care compared to almost any other nation in the world. Yet the United States trails behind many nations in the category "healthiest nation," and the average American does not live as long as citizens of other developed countries.

In a recent class at the University of Findlay, a student asked, "Why does the United States spend so much more on health care compared to other countries in the world?" Several others in this class believed that the life expectancy of an American citizen surpassed that of both citizens of Canada and Japan—their belief was that Americans should get something in return for all the money spent on health care. Some quick research on only four countries indicates that increased spending does not necessarily buy health for a person or longevity for a diverse population. As the chart that follows indicates, citizens of Japan and Canada live longer than U. S. citizens., and of the four groups, only Indian citizens have a shorter life span.

Life Expectancy – 2007ⁱⁱⁱ

Canada	80.3
India	68.6
Japan	81.4
United States	78.0
Worldwide Average	66.0

One might assume from these statistics that India spends less of its GDP on health care compared to the other three countries and

that is true. But Japan, with the longest life expectancy, spends less than Canada or the United States. GDP health expenditures appear in the following chart.

Health Expenditures Per Capita as % of GDP – 2003^{iv}

	Per Capita	% of GDP	2005 Per Capita
Canada	\$2,998	9.9%	\$3,359
India	\$100	5.2%	
Japan	\$2,294	8.0%	
United States	\$5,711	15.2%	\$6,401

It has been proved in the past (need citation here) that infant mortality is a good predictor of life expectancy. Thus, the lower the death rates of infants at birth, the higher the life expectancy of a population. Again, spending more money does not necessarily mean a lower infant mortality rate, which was found through research and reflected in the following data.

Infant Mortality per 1000 Live Births – 2007^v

Canada	4.6
India	34.6
Japan	3.2
United States	6.4

Although Japan spends approximately 60 percent less of its GDP on health care compared to the United States, its infant mortality rate is half that of the rate in the United States. The reasons for the wide discrepancy of health care costs in the United States are beyond the scope of this commentary. The following factors, taken as a whole, would seem to provide food for thought in future *Contemporary Issues*:

- Free market competitive system
- Demand for immediate access to care
- Greater use of specialists
- Administrative costs
- Diversity of population
- Life style unhealthy food, limited exercise
- Pharmaceutical costs
- Legal system—insurance and malpractice
- Societal issues—elderly family members in institutions
- Technology—high cost, high duplication
- Duplication of testing
- Lack of standardization on treating chronic diseases

It is true that there may be overlap in the above summary. And perhaps, this is the biggest challenge to policy makers who are charged with reining in spending. The important and overarching question is: How do we eliminate the overlapping and fragmented



health care system in the United States?

Endnotes

1. Retrieved Oct. 28, 2008 from: <http://tribes.tribe.net/triviarocks/thread/79eafca3-d43b-4349-822f-053cafb6a25f>
2. Retrieved Oct. 28, 2008 from: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005148.html>
3. Retrieved Oct. 26, 2008 from: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A004393.html>, hereinafter cited as “Info please”
4. Retrieved Oct. 26, 2008 from Kaiser Foundation Family website at: <http://www.kff.org/insurance/snapshot/chcm010307oth.cfm>
5. See Infoplease above.