



Behind the fight against corporate negligence

Featuring Andrew McGuire

Grassroots activist & Emmy-award winning filmmaker

Dispatcher: 911, what's your emergency?

Caller: America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying! (ambulance siren)

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazzar**. This time on **Code WACK!** How does the struggle for healthcare justice intersect with the movement to protect consumers? Besides intense organizing, what else is essential to winning Medicare for All? To find out, we spoke with Andrew McGuire, a lifelong trauma prevention specialist and grassroots activist who lives in Sonoma County, California. He's an MacArthur fellow and Emmy award-winning filmmaker who has produced films related to his work in trauma prevention. Andrew's also the executive director of Code WACK's parent organization, California OneCare.

Welcome to Code WACK!, Andrew!

McGuire: Glad to be here.

[\(00:50\)](#):

Q: You've worked all your life in trauma prevention. What sparked your interest in this area?

McGuire: (00:56): I was severely burned when I was seven years old on my 7th birthday and went through four hospitalizations, about a year and a half of recovery and that was a major traumatic event of my childhood. By sheer happenstance, my former wife and I moved to Boston – uh this is crazy – to apprentice with a harpsichord maker and I was going to be an instrument maker for the rest of my life. That's what I thought. But there was an article in the Boston Globe about a parents' group that was forming and these were parents of children severely burned and being treated at the Shriners Burn Institute in Boston and all of the kids of these parents had been burned when their pajamas ignited, which was similar to what happened to me, and the article said, 'we're going to have our organizing meeting. We invite the public to come and join us in this effort.'

(01:48):

And I went to the meeting. That was in November and February after writing a grant proposal – the first in my life I ever wrote having no idea what I was doing. A Boston foundation funded the effort and I was hired as the executive director and that was in February of 1974 and so we got flame-resistant pajamas for Massachusetts up to size 14. It became a federal standard a year and a half later and I thought, 'oh, if there's a way to prevent an injury, it's a very simple year and a half process' (laughter) and little did I know that all the other issues I'd work on would take 10 or 20 or 30 or 50 years.

(02:23):

Q: Tell us a little bit more about that incident. What happened when you were burned when you were seven?

(02:29):

McGuire: This was 1952 and this was in Oakland, California. I was being treated by a doctor, an orthopedic surgeon who had never treated a burn before in his life and he was at the end of his career so he had probably learned medicine from the 19th century <laugh> and because he's an orthopedic surgeon, he would graft my legs and put them in casts, plaster casts, which is what orthopedic surgeons do for broken bones.

Of course, what happened is after two weeks taking the cast off, there'd be necrotic tissue and they'd have to regraft again. So I went through four graftings, which should have been once and the fourth grafting was done by a plastic surgeon without casts, but besides the trauma, both physical and psychological trauma of all of that, being away from my parents, my sister couldn't visit – they didn't allow children in the hospital in those days – they only allowed two hours of visiting time

once around noon and once around 7 PM. Period. My father is a factory worker and he couldn't get time to come and go.

[\(03:30\)](#):

And my parents didn't own a car. So it was a lot of lonely time over a number of months and on top of all of that, and this is something I hadn't thought about until the last 20 years, is the medical bills piled up for my parents. Even though my father had Blue Cross insurance from Caterpillar Tractor Company, where he worked at the factory, but it wasn't enough coverage to cover all the bills. They got onto a monthly payment schedule with a hospital and with a couple of different physicians to pay monthly until I was almost 21 years old and so when I think today of "undercoverage" for health insurance, that's what my parents lived through and they were fully insured.

But that was the state of things for lower class kind of blue-collar workers in the early fifties. So that was my first experience that I didn't know about very much, but thought about a lot since I got involved in promoting single payer, as one of those small fallouts from a broken system that doesn't fully provide health care that's affordable. Imagine your parents or anyone's parents having to spend an extra 15 years paying off medical bills.

[\(04:36\)](#):

Q: How do you think that impacted your parents and you and your family?

[\(04:40\)](#):

McGuire: Well, I think it was a minor part of the impact because it was just dollars. It wasn't this emotional, psychological impact of severe trauma in a family because it's a family and friends and neighbors that get affected by someone severely injured but it was added on top of that, the financial problems. My parents never had a savings. They never had money to invest or anything like that. It was always paying off bills, medical bills. By the time they paid off mine, they were starting to approach the age where they had their own medical bills (laughter). Both my parents ended up having Alzheimer's. My father had almost 13 years from diagnosis to dying of care and we couldn't afford – my three sisters and I – could not afford to pay for his and my mother's care in California in the Bay Area so we literally moved them to Arizona to afford the long-term care. It's crazy.

[\(05:30\)](#):

Q: How does that make you feel when you think that you had to move your parents to Arizona and you couldn't take care of them where you were?

[\(05:37\)](#):

McGuire: Well, there aren't words to describe what it's like to have corporations dictate your life for reasons that they were simply wanting to make higher profits. That's what it's all about and when I look at the harm done by the insurance companies to other people, what I went through was manageable for my circumstances and my sisters. I have a sister that moved to Arizona. So the anger and all of that is, it's obvious that that's the response that any human being would have. But when I step back as an activist of someone who's taken on pajama manufacturers, the Cotton Council, and then later on, I worked on getting cigarettes that wouldn't ignite fires, wouldn't cause bedding and couches to catch fire and taking on the tobacco industry who fought that – that was 32 years of a fight – and the auto industry – not putting in airbags and the gun industry in my work and gun control, I've become really quite savvy and successful at knowing how much anger I have at these corporations because they have from the inside of my work, I've known what kinds of corporate decisions they make.

[\(06:44\)](#):

I've seen private secret memos from discovered documents in court cases and how they're making decisions and I'll give you one quick example that I think relates to the insurance industry, too is that Philip Morris cigarette manufacturer in 1987 had finished seven years of research, private research of their labs showing that they could make a cigarette that looked like and tasted like, and felt like, and mimicked a Marlboro best-selling brand cigarette that wouldn't cause fires, that if you dropped that cigarette lit onto a bed or a couch or a chair, it would self-extinguish, go out and not cause a fire.

They then had a memo in these private documents I was asked to read by a lawyer. They put it on the shelf – literally that's what they said – we'll put it on the shelf until there's undue pressure to put it into the marketplace. That undue pressure didn't actually happen till I got a state law passed in the state of New York, to mandate it in 2004, 17 years later. You know how many... a third of all people who die in cigarette fires were children and other adults that don't smoke – all unnecessary.

[\(07:47\)](#):

A corporate decision based on profit. The insurance industry, we do know, made private secret decisions to train their people on the other end of the telephone,

from someone who wants to know about their insurance, how to deny claims, even though people had the coverage in their policy. That's evil. I've accused the tobacco executives and lawyers who made these decisions, I accused the insurance industry. This is murder and murder is not the worst part in a sense it's the long-term pain and suffering that is extended to the general population who have bad insurance practices. We should eliminate all of those bad practices and just do what's common sense, which is you put money into the tax system and that tax system pays for your medical care like all the other major countries do and get rid of this nonsense of making money off of people's illness and bad luck. Someone who's hit by a drunk driver and the drunk driver has no insurance, your insurance doesn't quite cover everything and you're left with a \$400,000 medical bill. Why would that happen in a civilized society?

(08:51):

Q: So why did you pivot to advocating for healthcare equity and Medicare for All single-payer health care?

(08:56):

McGuire: This was at the very end of 2005, a friend of mine called me up and said, 'I'm volunteering for this organization. They've been around a while, but they don't have a budget. I'm helping them write their very first strategic plan to do advocacy. It's called Health Care for All - California. And would you talk to the chairman of their board? He lives in Berkeley and he can come over to San Francisco General Hospital' and so he brought over the chairman of the board and we sat down and his question was... in this plan, we're thinking of opening up a lobbying office in Sacramento and the board is not sure we should do it or not. Should we go out and raise money to get an office and a lobbyist and a person up there where we can have influence? And I said, I'll be very frank.

(09:40):

It's the absolute wrong thing to do. It's a waste of money. I actually used the example of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. MADD never had an office in Sacramento. It was the chapters, the grassroots effort that made MADD powerful, and the power in changing things and so I suggested that they just keep their chapter intact up and down the state and develop their chapters, put pressure on Assembly and Senate members at the local level. That's where they will hear you. That's where they know the votes will be counted and if you go to Sacramento, you're one of thousands of lobbyists and you'll be the lobbyist up there with no money to give out <laugh>. And so I was asked to come to, I think the January, a

couple months later, the January/February board meeting, where they wanted to thank me for my advice. It was a ruse. They asked me to be executive director <laugh> Halftime with no salary <laugh>. It was an offer I couldn't refuse and so that's how I got involved.

([10:37](#)):

Q: How would you describe where we are today in the decades-long fight for single payer in America?

McGuire: You know what we need? It's very simple. We need a huge financial investment in a long-term campaign for single payer, a major investment, cuz we have to battle the hundreds of millions of dollars the other side will gladly spend to keep preying on the sick and the vulnerable of Americans and to keep their next quarterly earnings healthy for all of their investors. Must always keep that in mind. The incentives in the current healthcare system were such that it's all about making money. So people in foundations who have the ability to donate large amounts of money, they should come forward. Their donations will alleviate the pain, the suffering, the anxiety for all the people of California who can't afford their health care. And it would also improve the financial health of workers, of businesses and state and local governments – that would all improve financially. So it's a win for people and it's a win for businesses and workers. It's the ethical and the moral thing to do and I would hope that donors would do their job immediately.

(5-second stinger)

Thank you, Andrew McGuire.

Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at heal-ca.org.

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