



We've accepted this healthcare system as normal. Should we?

“This health system benefits those who own it. The insurance companies, the pharmaceutical companies, private equity and venture capital firms, and those who lack the courage to confront it – the academic centers, the nonprofits, and the politicians, because they are all owned either through contributions or otherwise by the medical-industrial complex. And furthermore, what we need to understand is that this healthcare system is not normal. A healthcare system based on profit is not normal. A healthcare system that is not based on wellbeing and health is not normal. And everyone in one way or another is affected. And that’s why we need everyone to join together and to demand something better.” - Dr. Ana Malinow

Welcome to **Code WACK**, where we break down how our healthcare system really works, what it means for you, and how we can make it better for everyone. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazar**.

Nearly everyone has a healthcare story. For some, it's an insurance claim that was denied. For others, it's a medical bill they couldn't afford, a hospital that closed in their community or a job they didn't leave because their health insurance depended on it. Dr. Ana Malinow, a retired pediatrician and a longtime advocate for a national single payer healthcare system, says Americans have come to

accept experiences like these as simply part of life. She argues they don't have to be.

Malinow: You're absolutely right. It is normal for us. But if you just go anywhere outside of this country and you explain to them what our healthcare system is all about, they look at you incredulously. They can't believe that this is a normal healthcare system. You know, the medical debt, that affects 20 million people. That is almost non-existent in other countries. And yet with all of these statistics, you know, people just don't even bat an eye because we think that this is normal. We think that it's normal to have this two-tiered healthcare system where the poor have to prove their poverty month after month in order to get health insurance. We think that's normal. Well, it's not.

Malinow says one of the biggest misconceptions is that having health insurance means you're financially protected. She says millions of Americans have coverage they still struggle to use because deductibles and other out-of-pocket costs have become so high.

Malinow: We can say that there are about 25 million uninsured in this country, meaning they have no insurance and when they go see a doctor or go to the emergency room or [are] hospitalized [they] must pay out of pocket. And as a result, many have medical debt. However, about twice as many or about 50 million people in this country are underinsured. Meaning that yes, they have an insurance policy that they pay for and their employer pays for, but the deductible might be \$6,000, \$7,000, \$10,000 per year for that family. Meaning that they have to pay that \$10,000 deductible every year before their insurance for which they pay for every month kicks in a penny.

And according to [KFF.org](https://www.kff.org), 20 million people owe medical debt and medical debt, even though it affects all demographics, mostly almost all demographics in this country is not an equal opportunity lender. People with cancer are more likely to have medical debt. People with disabilities, or in worse health or lower income people and uninsured people are more likely to have medical debt. So I don't believe that this is the normal way to run a healthcare system for the health and

wellbeing of this country. And so being insured in America does not necessarily mean that you are insured.

Malinow believes the current moment presents another opportunity to rethink our healthcare system with insurance premiums, rising concerns about Medicaid funding and hospital closures affecting communities around the country. She says America is approaching a familiar crossroads, but unlike advocates who support more incremental reforms, Malinow argues the changes need to be much more fundamental.

Malinow: I think that we are in a crisis that is offering us a window of opportunity that comes up every few decades, and so we must seize this moment right now, and we must put forth a solution worthy of the crisis at hand.

Every time we have a healthcare crisis, single payer is derailed. We are told that this is not the time, that we could only hope for at best some kind of incremental reform. But I think that we have to stop replaying that playbook. A solution worthy of the crisis at hand is not a half measure. The proposals that are being guaranteed will set back the Medicare for All movement back another 15 years, just like the ACA set back the Medicare for All movement 15 years or longer.

One reform often proposed is a public insurance option. Malinow says the experience of Medicare Advantage shows why she believes that approach won't work.

Malinow: And let's be clear, the public option, which would pit a public program such as Medicare against a for-profit insurance program will not work. And we actually happen to have a natural experiment that we can point to. When seniors turn 65, they have this option to choose traditional, original fee for service, you know, public Medicare or the private insurance Medicare Advantage. Right? Despite the fact that traditional Medicare allows seniors their choice of doctors and hospitals without prior authorizations, most are now still choosing that private option. Why? Well, because it costs the average senior over \$6,000 per

year to pay for traditional Medicare compared to the \$2,000 it costs to pay for Medicare Advantage.

Now, how can these Medicare Advantage insurance companies afford to do this, to offer something so inexpensive? Is it because they're so much better at controlling costs [or] because they offer better deals?

Well, no, it's because the US government subsidizes these Medicare Advantage companies to the tune of over \$80 billion a year. That's right. The federal government overpays Medicare Advantage companies so that they can make more money. In fact, insurance companies now make a greater profit from a Medicare beneficiary, old chronically ill than for a young healthy worker on employer health insurance. Yeah, go figure.

So a public option would be another traditional Medicare, public Medicare up against the Medicare Advantage private insurance company. The advantage always, always goes to the medical industrial complex because they have bought out all the politicians who write the laws that further enrich the medical industrial complex. The only bold solution is to eliminate the medical industrial complex altogether, to remove profit from the healthcare system. Then we can actually have a real healthcare system in our country.

Malinow says the challenge isn't persuading the public. It's turning public support into political action.

Malinow: 60% of Americans agree with Medicare for All, right. So that battle we've won. The battle that we need to win is the organizational battle to organize people and to organize their power. We are up against powerful, wealthy forces, the entire medical industrial complex, and that must be acknowledged.

We're also up against organizations, organizations who would call themselves our allies, who want to be at the negotiating table. And is it in order to win Medicare for All or is it to be in control of the compromises as the pressures come and the bargaining begins, we are up against the Democratic Party, which must be acknowledged no more wants Medicare for All than the Republican Party. We are up against the incrementalists that don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good

people. The individuals peddling this Medicare by Choice, which is another term for the public option, for improving traditional Medicare, hoping that Medicare Advantage will wither on the vine. That's just not strategy. That's magical thinking. And all of this money is organized, and the way to fight organized money is with organized people from an organized grassroots movement that is so large and powerful that it cannot be denied.

That's the idea behind a campaign that Malinow's organization, National Single Payer, calls the Declaration of Independence from the Medical Industrial Complex. The campaign asks individuals and organizations to sign a declaration supporting a national single payer healthcare system. Organizers say they'll deliver those signatures to elected officials ahead of a virtual national town hall.

Malinow: Public action builds a movement. Private frustration just makes you more frustrated. Public action connects you to a community which increases your expectations and lowers your sense of hopelessness. Public action connects you to the only thing that will bring change and change is what this system needs.

Malinow says the declaration is intended to do more than register support for single-payer healthcare. She hopes it will help build a grassroots movement and encourage elected officials to engage in a broader national conversation. Her organization, National Single Payer, plans to deliver the declaration to members of Congress ahead of a virtual national town hall on October 14th. But for Malinow, the campaign is ultimately about something larger. It's about imagining a different kind of healthcare system for America.

Malinow: Imagine getting sick and having a primary care doctor who will see you in a timely manner. They know you and your family and practice close to where you live.

Imagine if you have a medical emergency, you go to an emergency center within five to 10 miles of where you live. You hand over your Medicare for Life card and are seen in a timely manner. You are treated and sent home with a prescription or hospitalized knowing you will never receive a bill.

You and your loved ones can focus on your condition, not on your bills.

Imagine being diagnosed with cancer and knowing this illness will not bankrupt you and your family.

Imagine being able to change jobs or start up your own business without worrying about losing your health benefits because it's not up to your boss whether you have health benefits or not.

Imagine being able to leave an abusive relationship or not getting into one in the first place without worrying about losing your health insurance or the health insurance of your children.

Imagine knowing you will not become uninsured when you turn 26.

Imagine never having to pay another health insurance, premium, copay or deductible. Imagine not having your employer's premium coming out of your paycheck every two weeks.

Imagine not having to qualify for Medi-Cal or not having to get health insurance through the exchanges, because in this world, everyone is covered under the same national single-payer improved Medicare for All, free from profit.

That's how everyday life would change for Americans, actually for everybody. I mean for every resident in this country, because every resident deserves this health care.

That was retired pediatrician, Dr. Ana Malinow of National Single Payer. For more information about the Declaration of Independence from the Medical Industrial Complex and the October 14th virtual town hall, visit nationalsinglepayer.com.

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This episode was powered by Heal California, uplifting the voices of those fighting for healthcare reform around the country.

Thanks for listening. I'm Brenda Gazar, and until next time, stay healthy.