A Personal Health Care Story
What it Tells Us About Universal Health Care

As predicted, President Barack Obama and his administration are in a “full-court press” mode, as they try to drum up the support needed to pass sweeping changes in how health care is controlled, delivered, and financed in the United States. Last week, I had an encounter with the U.S. health care system that really put a lot of the issues and rhetoric into perspective. Please let me share that experience with you.

On Friday morning, two weeks ago, I woke up with an ache in my upper abdomen. At first, I ignored it, thinking maybe I had a little gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining) after eating a bit too well while traveling through Scotland and Ireland in May. The pain was not enough to seek emergency treatment, but it came and went all weekend. I began to worry about all of the things that might be causing the pain.

On Monday morning, the pain was still there, so I called my general practitioner’s office when it opened. I was squeezed in to see the doctor that morning. Blood tests were run, and an ultrasound scan of my abdomen was scheduled for a day or so later.

On Friday morning, I met the doctor again. He said that there was nothing in any of the tests that could explain my discomfort and felt that a more detailed CT (computerized tomography) scan of my abdomen should be done as soon as possible. A call was placed to a radiology group with multiple offices in the Denver area. My CT scan was performed that afternoon, my doctor was informed, and treatment was immediately started.

Had I needed a consultation with a specialist, surgery, or an additional diagnostic procedure, I am almost certain that too, could have been quickly accomplished.

Most of the costs will be covered by our excellent health insurance plan benefits at Outrigger.

Now, what would have happened if I had been a Canadian citizen living in a major city in Canada and receiving my health care through the Canadian Health Act, that country’s universal, taxpayer-funded health insurance system? Every case is different, of course, but from the research I have done on the Canadian system, here’s my best guess.

First of all, I probably would not have been able to see a doctor so quickly. There are many reports indicating Canada has a significant shortage of doctors. Low pay, frustrating working conditions, and red tape have caused thousands of physicians to leave Canada and deter others from locating there. An article in the Nov. 21, 2005, edition of Chronicle Journal estimates that 10,000 Canadian doctors have left their country to work in the United States.

I would probably have also had to wait weeks or even months to get my ultrasound and CT scans.

Long delays in obtaining specialist consultations, surgery, and other procedures in Canada have been well documented. Every year for 18 years, the Fraser Institute, an independent research and educational organization with offices throughout Canada, has produced a study titled “Waiting Your Turn – Hospital Waiting Lists in Canada.”

Here are some interesting statistics culled from their 145-page report for 2008.

The First Wait – 8.5 Weeks
The average waiting time to see a specialist after referral by a general practitioner.

The Second Wait – 8.7 Weeks
The average waiting time between specialist consultation and treatment.

Total Wait – 17.3 Weeks (four months!)
Total average waiting time between referral to a specialist by a general practitioner and the beginning of treatment. (Study group: 12 specialties and 10 provinces)

The waits to see a specialist and to receive treatment are not the only delays facing Canadians. Patients also experience significant waiting times for various diagnostic technologies across the country. As an example, the 2008 Fraser Institute report included the median wait times for several commonly-used medical imaging procedures such as a CT scan, MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), and an ultrasound scan (medical ultrasonography):
In one province, Prince Edward Island, the mean waiting time for an ultrasound scan was 35.0 weeks – over eight months!

Compare those numbers with my recent experience.

The delays in Canada add up and cause frustration, pain and suffering. They allow diseases to progress, which makes them harder and more expensive to treat. There is no way to calculate the total cost of these delays. I could not find any statistics on the number of people who die needlessly while languishing on a waiting list.

The Obama administration is making every effort to create a universal health care system in the United States similar to what they have in Canada. If that happens, it will be a grave mistake.

My recent illness made me focus on what a great health care system we have in our country. It has its problems – serious ones, no question about it – but our free enterprise system makes it possible for us to fix them, which I believe would be a much better route to take than putting a Canadian-style system in place. We’ll discuss alternatives in future articles.

By the way, I am feeling much better now. I will be in Honolulu next week and hope to see many of our `ohana in person.