

Book Review for

CRITICAL CONDITION:

HOW HEALTH CARE IN AMERICA BECAME BIG BUSINESS & BAD
MEDICINE

by

Donald L. Barlett & James B. Steele

2004

Doubleday

We all know by now that America's health care is far from the best in the world, despite our spending more on health care than any other nation in the world. And we all know that health care is grossly unevenly distributed, with some of our citizens receiving state-of-the-art care while others do without entirely. And we all know that even those with health insurance risk losing that coverage every time they actually need it.

But do we really know how it got to be that way?

Donald Barlett and James Steele are here to help us understand the social and economic forces underlying the chaos of American health care delivery.

Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele have been an investigative team since 1971, studying complex American institutions central to our lives. They have been called "almost certainly the best team in the history of investigative reporting," by the Washington Journalism Review. Their focus is to advocate

equitable treatment by government of all Americans with keen wariness of the private sector. <http://www.barlettandsteele.com/about.html>

In 2004, they turned their attentions to America's health care system, which they call "really no system at all." In six trim and easily readable chapters, they lay out a clear description of the problem, identify four primary causes, and lay out their suggested remedy. Each chapter includes illustrative personal stories of individual patients directly affected by these nasty problems, whose health care depended on a shamefully complex system based on greed and market manipulation, some of whose lives were lost due to the ineptitude of the American business model to meet America's health care needs.

The forces Barlett and Steele studied include the inapplicability of the private business model as a structure for health care delivery, the naive faith the public and the government have placed in that model resulting in their failure to monitor and spot problems as they arise, the consequences of the tangle of uneven regulations and communications systems among the players, and the influence of advertising.

Though Barlett and Steele conclude that the ideal solution would be a single payer system that provides universal coverage, unfortunately, they were pessimistic that Americans have the political will to create such a system within the government, and they propose, instead, a U. S. Council on Health Care that would create and oversee the next best thing to it.

But the political landscape has been changing even since 2004, and Americans are beginning to see such a government system as our only salvation. The data and analyses and stories in this book will help anyone understand what has gone wrong and why, and will help those of us working toward a single-payer universal coverage plan to grasp the evidence in its favor.

These 258 highly engaging pages do great justice to the issues. It is highly recommended as a must read for anyone working in the health care delivery system, anyone working toward a single-payer universal coverage, anyone curious about why the free market private enterprise fails to function in health care, and anyone considering political leadership in America in the next decade.

by Denise C. Woods

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