WHY I'D RATHER BE SICK HERE THAN IN U.S.

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By Bob Hepburn, The Toronto Star, 20 August 2009

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Their fear-mongering is aimed at frightening Americans and ultimately derailing President Barack Obama's proposals, timid as they are, to reform U.S. health care.

For weeks, Americans have been told that Canada pushes its sickest and weakest to the bottom of wait lists, that our health care is inferior, that it's the government that decides who lives and who dies.
Despite these attacks, the reality is that the overall quality of health care experienced in Canada is far better than in the United States.

If you have any doubt, just ask yourself this simple question:

Would you rather be sick here or in the U. S.?

For me, the answer is obvious.

I have worked and studied in the U.S. for a total of 10 years and, although I have received good care from American doctors and clinics, I'd much rather be sick here.

I'm not alone in feeling this way.

While some of us gripe about wait times and the shortage of doctors and nurses, a recent EKOS poll indicated 87 per cent of Canadians believe our health-care system is better than the U.S. model.

Why is our system superior?

First, it's universal. Everyone is entitled to treatment and they get the same level of care as a multi-millionaire. By contrast, in the U.S. the rich can buy top care and jump to the head of the waiting line.

But treatment for all other Americans depends on how much private insurance they have, or if they have any insurance at all, which 50 million don't.

Second, I visited doctors twice in the last week and never had to haul out my credit card or chequebook before I could see them.

Sure, I pay through my taxes, but that's far better than paying directly for every step of my care.

No Canadian winds up bankrupt because he or she had to pay for health care, which happens in the U.S., where private insurers often reject people with serious illnesses seeking coverage. Such incidents are so common that filmmaker Michael Moore easily made a documentary, Sicko, that focused on problems with the U.S. health insurance industry.

Third, the quality of care I got in the last week was unparalleled. Indeed, polls have consistently shown that more than 90 per cent of us are pleased with the level of care we have received.

Top surgeons at Toronto-area hospitals, for example, are as good as any in the U.S., and they treat patients based on need, not the size of their bank accounts. Nurses and other health professionals are well-trained, too, with standards often exceeding those in the U.S.

Fourth, many of our medical outcomes top those in the U.S. We live longer, our infant mortality rates are lower, our cancer and heart disease levels and the rate of low-birth weight babies, are better.

Fifth, I only had to wait several weeks to see a specialist. Overall, wait times for many procedures, such as hip replacements, are dropping dramatically now that more money and attention have been focused on the problem.

Sixth, I feel better knowing that part of my health dollars aren't going to line the pockets of fat-cat private health insurers, whose profits in the U.S. have equalled the total amount of money that Canada spends annually on health care for all its citizens.

Admittedly, our system is not perfect. There is a shortage of doctors and nurses, limited access to some diagnostic services, different levels of care in different parts of the country and rapidly rising costs.

But similar problems exist in every country in the world.

To address these issues, doctors at the Canadian Medical Association's annual meeting this week urged Ottawa and the provinces to look at increasing the use of private-sector operators in delivering publicly funded health care.

But allowing more private health care in Canada isn't the answer to our medicare shortcomings.

The way to resolve most of our problems is to spend more money. If anything, we don't spend enough. Canada spends just 10 per cent of its gross national product on health care while the U.S. spends a whopping 16 per cent.

If we spent as much as the Americans did, there would be no doubt at all about where you'd rather be if you became sick.

Bob Hepburn's column appears Thursdays. bhepburn@thestar.ca