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# The one thing that's missing from the health care debate

**T**he Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) may soon be out and the American Health Care Act (AHCA) may soon be in. Despite all of the rhetoric about making health care affordable by reducing insurance premiums, one thing has been conspicuously absent from the debate: how we are going to reduce the actual cost of health care. Yes, the AHCA may help reduce premiums, but what is most likely to result is not less expensive health care, but rather people paying less money on premiums and more out of their pockets for medicines and treatments. Especially troublesome is that older and sicker patients will be hit the hardest.

**■ The American conundrum.** Why do Americans pay twice what citizens of most other developed nations pay and get health care outcomes that are worse?<sup>1,2</sup> Two reasons are that those who provide health care charge more in this country for services and medications, and physicians do a lot more testing and treatment here than their counterparts abroad.

**If we control the cost of providing care, insurance premiums will follow suit.**

One expert estimated that up to \$700 billion could be saved by eliminating testing and treatments that provide marginal or no value to patients.<sup>3</sup> For example, knee arthroscopy for moderate knee osteoarthritis produces no better outcomes than medical management.<sup>4</sup> And many medications are much more expensive in the United States than in other countries. It seems that pharmaceutical companies are permitted greater profits here than elsewhere in the world, and these profits are at the expense of sick people and taxpayers.

**■ How do we bend the cost curve downward?** This is a tough question with no single correct answer, but we can all help. Some health care organizations have already reduced costs significantly without sacrificing quality by using team-based primary care as their foundation. Two examples are Nuka Health and Iora Health.<sup>5,6</sup>

As primary care physicians, we are in an ideal position to constrain unnecessary testing and treatments by establishing trusting relationships with patients, who will believe us when we tell them they don't need an antibiotic for their chest cold or an MRI for their back pain.

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jpg.eic@gmail.com