

What is socialized medicine?

Does the term “socialized medicine” frighten you? It’s supposed to. Let’s look at where the term came from and what it really means.

In 1945 President Harry S. Truman proposed the National Health Act to provide national health insurance coverage to U.S. citizens. It was modeled after similar programs in several European countries ⁽¹⁾. Congress did not pass this legislation because of fierce political opposition, but it formed the basis for the current Medicare and Medicaid programs in the U.S. ⁽²⁾

Why was there so much opposition to this program? Like Medicare and Medicaid, Truman’s proposal would have restricted the fees physicians could be paid for their services. The American Medical Association (AMA) saw these efforts as a threat to doctors’ right to free enterprise. The AMA developed a campaign designed to turn public opinion against the proposal ⁽³⁾.

To take advantage of public anxiety about the threat of communism, the campaign developed the term “socialized medicine.” With funding from the AMA and the pharmaceutical industry, full page illustrated ads and editorials were published in major U.S. newspapers and magazines. The strategy was to link Truman’s health care initiative to an anti-democratic political agenda ⁽⁴⁾. It worked. Truman’s efforts failed. It took over 25 years before Medicare and Medicaid were created.

The term “socialized medicine” is still used today. The goal is the same- to make people fear efforts to provide universal coverage for basic health care needs. The strategy continues to be very effective. The U.S. is the only rich country that doesn’t provide some form of health care coverage for every citizen.

The U.K., Canada, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan are some of the countries that guarantee health coverage for all residents. They all have better health outcomes and more doctors per person than the U.S. Don’t believe it? That’s because you’ve been told that the U.S. has the best health care system in the world, but it’s just not true ^(5, 6).

Some argue that technically, the U.K. is the only country with a true system of socialized medicine because the government employs the providers and owns the hospitals and clinics. Other countries provide universal coverage using private insurance and independent providers who bill for their services, or a combination of public and private systems ⁽⁷⁾.

Is “socialized medicine” a form of socialism or communism? Socialism and communism are political systems in which the government owns the means of production like farms and factories. This is different from capitalism, a political system where private individuals

or corporations own the means of production. In the U.S., the government provides many public services including public education, public libraries, public parks, highways, police and fire services. That doesn't make the U.S. a socialist or communist country.

Providing guaranteed health coverage for all U.S. residents wouldn't be a form of socialism or communism any more than it is in Canada, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea or Japan. They all provide some form of guaranteed health coverage to all residents. They also provide guaranteed access to education, parks, libraries, police and fire services, just like the U.S.

For over 90 years, a clever public relations campaign has convinced us that we're better off having access to healthcare be predominantly tied to employment. If access to education, parks, libraries, highways, police and fire services was only available if employers provided it as an employee benefit, a lot of people would lose access to necessary and important services.

Does "socialized medicine" still feel uncomfortable? If so, consider this. There's a large system of socialized medicine right here in the U.S. It employs physicians, nurses and other providers who provide inpatient and outpatient care at hundreds of facilities across the country. Patients don't pay for these services; the federal government does. The providers are salaried, they don't bill for the services they provide. This large, socialized medicine system is provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)⁽⁸⁾. You may have a VA health care facility in your town or in a town nearby. You may know someone who served in the U.S. Armed Forces who receives care at a VA facility.

Don't be fooled by the term "socialized medicine." You can learn more about health care coverage at <https://www.asclepiusinitiative.org>.

References:

1. National Archives Harry S. Truman Library. *The Challenge of National Healthcare*. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/challenge-national-healthcare>
2. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. *Tracing the History of CMS Programs: From President Theodore Roosevelt to President George W. Bush*. <https://www.cms.gov/about-cms/agency-information/history/downloads/presidentcmsmilestones.pdf>
3. Truman Presidential Museum & Library. *Background Essay on: National Healthcare Challenges of the Presidency*. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/Healthcare_Handouts.pdf
4. Poen, M.M. (1979) *Harry S. Truman versus the Medical Lobby: The Genesis of Medicare*. University of Missouri Press.
5. The Asclepius Initiative. *How does health insurance in the United States differ from other countries*. Retrieved May 6, 2024, from

https://www.asclepiusinitiative.org/_files/ugd/cfb40c_64392e32e98640309ba7c92f178147b2.pdf

6. Gunja, M.M., Gumas, E.D., Williams II, R.D. (2023, January 31). *U.S. Health Care from a Global Perspective, 2022: Accelerating Spending, Worsening Outcomes*. <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2023/jan/us-health-care-global-perspective-2022>
7. *What is socialized medicine?* Retrieved May 6, 2024, from <https://www.healthinsurance.org/glossary/socialized-medicine>
8. Gordon, S. (2018, November 5). *Veterans' health care: Island of socialized medicine in a for-profit sea*. Gordon, S. (2018, November 5). *Veterans' health care: Island of socialized medicine in a for-profit sea*. <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/veterans-health-care-island-of-socialized-medicine-in-a-for-profit-sea>