

'Is this what we'll become?'

Michael Moore's latest film is a boundary-pushing, in-your-face journey through American health care. Let it serve as a cautionary tale

By Janice Kennedy

There are a number of Canadians who really should go see *Sicko*, Michael Moore's disturbing new film about the American health care system/industry.

One of them is Dr. Brian Day, president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association -- he takes over next month -- and president-CEO of Vancouver's Cambie Surgeries Corporation. That's the company that developed the first private health care facility in the country, the Cambie Surgery Centre, which describes itself as the "only free standing private hospital in Canada," though it's also a "proud member" of the Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association. At Dr. Day's private hospital with its broad stable of accomplished surgeons, you can get everything from general, plastic and laparoscopic surgery to complicated operations on your eyes, ears-nose-throat and personal plumbing. As long as you have the money. Or the private insurance coverage.

Since his controversial election to the CMA's top post, Dr. Day has been making emphatic public declarations of affection for universal health care. He does not, he has said repeatedly, want to dismantle the Canada Health Act -- although he did call for its repeal in 2002 during the Romanow Commission hearings. He also called for increased privatization, competition and the introduction of user fees.

But no, he says, he's not out to destroy Canada's universal health care. He does, however, want to see a much greater role in its delivery for the private (that is, profit-making) sector.

Which is why he really should go see *Sicko*.

In fact, all Canadians should see it, especially those who -- recognizing the obvious flaws and deficiencies in our system -- look to the profit-making model south of the border as an answer to our prayers.

The opening scene is not for those who wince easily. It shows Adam, one of nearly 50 million Americans who have no health insurance, sewing up his own torn leg after an accident because he can't afford what a hospital would charge to do it.

Fifty million human beings in the cradle of democracy, the most prosperous nation on Earth, living without access to health care? Appalling as that is, it is not really what *Sicko* is about. Moore's film is actually about the quarter-billion Americans who are insured, the ones who pay money to giant health care insurance companies so that, when bad things happen to them, they will get the care they need.

At least in theory.

Moore's *Sicko* takes an uncompromising look at that theory, and the result is horrifying. The film, which opened across North America just more than a week ago, has infuriated critics in the United States, where the liberal filmmaker consistently gets under conservative skin. And *Sicko*, infused with Moore's trademark boundary-pushing and in-your-face irreverence, is indeed coming in for its predictable share of bashing from people who think it is a) un-American and b) disrespectful of the perfectly sound capitalist principle of reverence for megaprofits, even at the cost of human lives and untold misery.

Sicko is a mesmerizing journey through health care in the U.S. (the only western nation without a universal system), an intensely discomfiting examination of the system built on HMOs (Health Maintenance Organizations) and the level of social responsibility you expect of big corporations. The business model of health care delivery is one of Richard Nixon's legacies. *Sicko* audiences get to listen in on an early 1970s tape from the Oval Office, hearing the president express leeriness about anything smacking of "socialized medicine." But he quite likes this new idea, a structure that will provide less care and generate more profit. "Fine," says Nixon. "Not bad." The next day, Moore tells us, he announced a "new health strategy" based on HMOs.

And judging by *Sicko*'s vivid evidence, Americans have been suffering ever since.

The film introduces you to a couple in their 50s who are moving in to a storage room at their daughter's house because they have lost their own home, victims of exorbitant medical bills. (He had a series of heart attacks, she developed cancer -- and their insurer stopped covering them.) You meet a wiry 79-year-old who has to labour hard as a custodian to pay for the medications he and his wife need. ("If there are golden years," he says, "I can't find 'em.")

You meet people who have been dropped by their insurance companies (a woman who'd once had a yeast infection was informed that she had failed to report a "pre-existing condition"), as well as people who have had their claims denied for any number of outrageous reasons. One 22-year-old woman was told she was "too young" to have cervical cancer. Another was turned down because her brain tumour was deemed not life-threatening. She has since died.

"Who are we?" Moore asks his fellow Americans poignantly. "Is this what we've become?"

Sicko is filled with stories that break your heart at the same time they enrage you. Among the powerful scenes are the testimonials by former employees of the big companies, some of them so ironically named (Good Samaritan, Humana) it's painful. Dr. Linda Peeno, a former medical reviewer for Humana, describes the percentage of claim denials expected by the company and tells of the bonuses medical directors can expect if they rack up a high number of treatment denials. The terminology is enlightening. "Any payment for a claim," says Dr. Peeno, "is referred to as a medical loss."

Sure, the film has its flaws. Moore sometimes makes his point with a little sweeping under the rug. Canadians seeing the portrayal of our health care system will be amused by its rosiness, since any Canadian who's ever received medical services can pinpoint in sometimes painful detail the numerous things we do wrong or have allowed to go wrong. It's also difficult to imagine that Britain and France are quite the health-care nirvanas Moore makes them out to be.

Still, as one woman in a London, Ont. waiting room noted, "It's a fabulous system for making sure that the least of us and the best of us are taken care of."

And the film's flaws do not change its fundamental truth. Despite the nits being scrupulously picked by Moore's frantic critics, the film makes one crucial thing blindingly clear: corporate greed and health care are not a happy fit.

That's why governments have a duty to look out for the citizens they're elected to serve. That's why governments, in this one sacrosanct field where the very lives of their citizens are at stake, are duty-bound to stand guard against leeches with a taste for lifeblood and a cavalier disregard for how they get it.

You want to charge me the moon and the stars for some fancy new piece of entertaining technology? Go for it. You want to let me die because the procedure I need might compromise your profit margin?

No, not allowed. Not in Canada, anyway.

Not yet.

The Ottawa-based Canadian Health Care Coalition worries about the accession of Brian Day to the CMA presidency and rumblings generally from the association. It is so concerned about Dr. Day and the CMA that it features on its website (healthcoalition.ca) a comprehensive "fact check" on the good doctor's repeated claims.

There is a greater and greater willingness to farm things out to private concerns, says Michael McBane, the coalition's national co-ordinator, and Dr. Day, the CMA and various conservative politicians are pushing it. In fact, he adds, countering Dr. Day's complaint that the Canadian model excludes competition, 30 per cent of current health care spending in Canada is private. And that is not good news, he says, resulting in overall poorer quality of care and greater cost.

It is Dr. Day's continued campaigning for privatization that disturbs McBane, with the underlying suggestion that equal health care is not workable. "That's really radical. That gets at the heart of our values."

Does McBane think Dr. Day should take in a screening of Sicko? "Absolutely. I don't know how you can't be affected on a human level by the nature of the tragedies in the film. To me, it's a warning for Canadians: This is coming our way unless we stop it." That's why the coalition has also called on Stephen Harper to take in a screening.

He pauses, mulling an idea.

"Maybe the prime minister should bring his family with him to see it."

Whatever works. In the purest and most unsettling way, Moore's Sicko is an alarming, cautionary tale.

The sly and relentless evisceration of our health care system, encouraged by some of this country's top politicians and doctors, should have every Canadian crying out in protest. While we still can.

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Janice Kennedy is a Citizen senior writer whose column appears here weekly.

jkennedy@thecitizen.canwest.com