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Summary

Without food any person would die within weeks. However many people can go years, some a lifetime, without visiting a doctor. Thus, food is immediately more critical to our well-being than health care. Before Oregon adopts a single-payer health care system, perhaps we should implement a single-payer food system to make sure the concept works.

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“If single payer is such a good idea for the health care sector, then surely it should first be applied to a sector more important to people’s immediate well being, like food.”

Single payer food

By James Frogue

On the November ballot is an initiative that, if passed, would create single payer health care in Oregon. Proponents claim that by having the state pay for nearly everyone’s medical needs this will provide high quality, accessible, affordable, and comprehensive care to all Oregonians. If this is such a good idea for the health care sector, then surely it should first be applied to a sector more important to people’s immediate well being, like food.

While proper health care is important, some people go years without seeing a doctor and are perfectly healthy. Without food on the other hand, any person would die within several weeks. Therefore, because there are people in Oregon who do not get enough to eat, let’s start with single payer food. From this point on, anyone can walk in to any restaurant or supermarket and take whatever food they need, cost free to them.

Think about it, this would mark an end to hunger problems in Oregon. All Oregonians would be eating better quality food than they’ve ever had and the taxpayer would pick up the tab. Rejoice, problem solved.

Then again, perhaps we should stop and think through the likely behaviors that would follow in the event that single payer food became law. For one, people are sure to take far more food than they do now, not because they would necessarily eat more but simply because its free. Why take four apples, when you can take eight, even if you know you won’t eat them all. People would also head straight for the very best restaurants and lay claim to the most expensive food. Why not, it’s free?

Obviously, such a system could not be sustained indefinitely. Demand would far exceed supply. So how would the entity paying the bills and the food suppliers (restaurant and supermarket owners) likely respond?

We’ll start with the bill payer. Without question, the tab would be far beyond the state’s (the taxpayers’) ability and willingness to pay. The state would therefore have essentially two options: ratchet down what it pays to restaurants and supermarkets per item and/or be more selective in the food items it covers. One wonders about the criteria the government might use. Regardless, this still would not solve the inevitable over consumption.

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The suppliers would be none too happy. How would you like it if someone other than your customers began telling you what you could charge? The suppliers' incentive would remain pleasing the bill payer, only that would no longer be the customer but some faceless state bureaucracy. What they put on the shelves or on the menu would be determined less by consumer demand and more by what the state is covering and how much it is paying. Does anyone think this would improve the quality and availability of food? You might if you think the government is a better determiner of your needs than you are.

(By the way, as a fun little experiment ask the owner of your favorite restaurant if she thinks single payer food is a good idea and would work).

Of course let's not forget what the food consumer would inevitably face – lines, rationing, and lower quality food. Lines and explicit rationing because those are the only ways single payer systems can keep demand in check, and lower quality food because the better supermarket and restaurant operators would not want to continue operating in a system that discriminates against quality. Call them crazy.

Single payer food, like single payer housing, single payer transportation, and yes, single payer health care, has never worked. But there is always a first for everything. Maybe the only reason single payer has never worked in any economic system in any country is because the right people were not in charge. Just try single payer food first in Oregon to make sure it works.

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“Consumers in a single payer system would inevitably face lines, rationing, and lower quality.”

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