

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
"Vending-Machine Health Care"
Friday, August 21, 2009
Word Count: 750

The more I hear about death panels, the more I like the idea. Let's save a few bucks. Unfortunately, it's a bogus allegation, but it has possibilities if worked right, especially if I sit on the death panel.

I love the hypocrisy of some of those shouters at Town Hall meetings attacking Obama. How outraged were they when protesters would interrupt and vilify George Bush? Gooses and ganders. There are those hypocrites who take offense at how Obama is knocked, but they thought it funny to hear Bush mocked. It's an American sport (ask Phillies or Red Sox fans): it's okay to denounce someone you despise, but it's not okay for the other. If we are lucky, we'll bring back that old Boston tradition of tar and feathering. Anybody got a rail? How quick the venom spurts when passions coil in fear.

So, in the interest of being fair to the lunatic and sagacious alike, let's keep the idea of the death panel on the table. At the same time, let's add a few more issues that are being neglected in our national yelling match. In my last column I asked when did health care become a product, a commodity? If we take the profit motive out of health care, we'd have no problem today. The fact is that we already have nationalized health care. It's just that the hospitals cover the losses out of their profits.

Another point absent from today's debate is any talk about what you are going to do to stay healthy. Please note how I am talking about you, not me. Getting out of my Naugahyde La-Z-Boy is exercise enough, thank you. Given the clips I've seen of some Town Hall meetings, I understand why some of those

noisy folks wag their fingers against any meddling with their health care. Many sure look like they're really going to need a doctor soon.

Can we address how we suffer from a vending-machine mentality? I sticks my money in -- I want my candy bar. I want to get what I want to get and I want it now, whether from God or Government. Senator: you'd better do what I say. I expect my government to solve my problems. Why should I break a sweat solving them? That's your job. Excuse me, oo,' my back hurts -- where's my disability check?

We clergy types see this attitude in how we've sold the public on the screwy and inverted notion that God is some "domestic butler or cosmic therapist," a god who will soothe, fix, approve them. Little wonder many find religion ultimately disappointing: they don't find for what they are searching or get what they demand. God cheated me, they say.

Teachers suffer from our vending-machine mentality too. When did students start thinking that teacher works for them? One student blamed his lousy grade on his professor because she didn't answer his question. Of course, he emailed it to her at midnight, 8 hours before the assignment was due. How dare she not wait breathlessly at her computer screen!

A doctor I know feels this pressure everyday. What are you going to do when your patient is 300 pounds, refuses to stop eating Twinkies, sits around watching The People's Court, won't exercise, is diabetic, enjoys his handicap sticker and SSI, then blames Doc when his heart rebels? A death panel might be a good idea in his case. This guy's a bum investment. Why bother? Yet he arrives at the Emergency Room demanding Cadillac care. Save me (or I'll sue you)! Why bother reviving him if he isn't going to save himself?

Well, of course, you do bother. You do your medical best, even if he won't. But it would be nice if he would ante up, especially since his selfishness is draining resources others need.

The final missing aspect in our health care feeding frenzy is a frank and faithful talk about death. For it's okay to die. People do it all the time. I help them die. Those who have lived well tend to die well, even with pain. There comes a time when enough is enough, when fear of death becomes abusive. It's not about making a decision to cause someone you love to die, it is about recognizing the kinder decision that nature already has made. We can intrude with our tubes, drugs, machines. The death panel verdict already is in: there is no health care package good enough to prevent your death.