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All In Chicago: An Outsider's Perspective

Written by Ryan Stafford

Hi, I'm Ryan. I recently moved to Chicago from England, where I shall be living and working for the next six months.

Let me start by saying I care greatly about health care. I'm certainly not impartial about the subject, but what I lack in impartiality, I make up for in experience. The National Health Service (NHS) in England has saved my life on two occasions and provided their expertise to countless others. Growing up in Britain, my experience with the NHS has always been one of compassion and care. It was only after I'd matured that I also realized how fortunate I was that their services had always been free. Looking back now, I can only imagine the bill I would've racked up from the time I spent in the hospital when I was diagnosed with Stevens-Johnson Syndrome--a very rare disease--at age 15, and again at age 20. During this time, I was in a hospital bed for months, saw numerous specialists, had an abundance of scans, was treated with various medicines, and much more. This hypothetical bill (which my family never saw) has felt more vivid since I entered the healthcare industry in the U.S. There appears to be a continuous flow of news stories chronicling families who are crumbling under the weight of medical bills.

According to a report from the Kauffman Family Foundation, around [40% of Americans have debt related to illness](#). This strikes me as particularly alarming on two levels. Firstly, on an empathetic level, having had a rare illness twice, I'm aware I would likely be one of those in debt if I lived here. Secondly, it strikes me as unfair that the largest amount of debt in the U.S. is one that the majority of individuals have no control over. I think that financially penalizing someone for



suffering ill health casts the capitalistic aspect of the U.S. health care system in an unflattering and uncompromising light.

I believe my personal opinions on this issue actually reveal a wider cognitive disjuncture in attitudes towards health care on either side of the Atlantic. The vast majority of Brits view access to health care as a human right, one provided at no cost regardless of circumstances. In America, however, the responsibility of maintaining your health – including accessing quality preventive and responsive care- is transferred from the state to the individual. This, in turn, shifts the role of health care in society from a collective betterment to an individual prerogative. This distinction wouldn't be an issue if health care provisions truly did extend to every American resident; however, the latest [Gallup Poll](#) found that over 11% of the adult population in the U.S. are not insured. It is uncomfortable but perhaps necessary to place ourselves in the shoes of that 11%. The grim reality is that many Americans are forced to make a choice between needed medication and basic provisions, such as food. It is difficult for many, including myself, to imagine having to make such choices. It is also difficult to imagine that anyone would intentionally force these choices upon people; nevertheless, this is the reality for millions of U.S. residents.

Due to the current setup of the health care system, the work done by free and charitable clinics in the U.S. is absolutely crucial. I'm certainly proud to work for CommunityHealth. I'm also grateful for the opportunity I had to work on the [Illinois Free and Charitable Clinic Month](#) campaign, and to all I encountered during the month of August that are providing access to care for those who need it most. But the fate of millions of Americans rests in the hands of volunteer-driven and donation-supported clinics, managed by people with kind hearts and a strong sense of civic duty. From my perspective, it should be the responsibility of all U.S. citizens and government leaders to be 'All In' on ensuring every U.S. citizen has access to high quality health care.

all in⁷

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*Ryan Stafford is currently the Communications and Social Media Intern at **CommunityHealth**. He grew up and attended school in Ipswich of Suffolk, England, before completing his undergraduate degree at York St John University and his postgraduate degree at the University of Leeds, with a focus on communications and media. Ryan's opinions are his own, and we're grateful to have him supporting our development and communications team during his stay - and, of course, for sharing his story about why he's 'all in' to support CommunityHealth's campaign to serve those without essential health care.*

*Together, we can make Chicago a healthier place to be. Are you **all in**?*