One of my favorite physicians, who has never been known to pull punches, once said that “No matter what Steinbrenner does, baseball is still about the players.”

I feel that way about our healthcare system. I have traveled extensively and am always interested in how other countries handle their medical needs.

In Canada it is socialized, with long waiting lists and exclusions by age and health status for services. In England it is socialized with a private pay access, so it functions as a two-tier system, abhorrent to Americans. In Ireland much the same and in Nepal nothing is provided if you cannot pay. Each is distinctly different and inherently reflects the values of that culture.

In England, my cousin is dying of breast cancer at age 44 because England does not fund screening mammograms in their system. In Ireland, my uncle waited six weeks for a surgical consult and another two months for surgery after he was diagnosed with colon cancer. He ultimately died. Did the delay in accessing specialty care and surgery have a negative effect on his prognosis? One wonders.

In Nepal, if you are hit by a car, need treatment and cannot pay, you simply are not treated. That concept is totally anathema to an American.

My conclusion, after looking for many years, is that our healthcare system is quite flawed and pretty broken – and still the best in the world. When someone in Europe or the Middle East or Canada is REALLY sick, where do they come? Here. Why?

We have the finest medical training programs in the world, and the United States has always been willing to fund the cutting-edge research and technology that the finest physicians need. Our culture places a very high value on good health, and our system reflects that. This has come to cost us a great deal, has affected the ability to fund universal coverage of all residents, and decisions may well have to be made about where the money gets spent in the future. We need to be very careful.

I have watched as hospitals, health systems and other larger, more organized entities than physicians have been able to prevent cuts from insurance companies and the federal government, but as the years have gone on the physicians are paid less and less. Why is that?

Whether it is the joyous birth of a baby, the tragedy of a stroke to one of our parents, or the skill of the trauma surgeon saving our child who was driving recklessly one night, each of us has experienced placing our faith in the excellent skills and caring intentions of our doctor. Not the hospital, maybe the nurses, but always the doctor.

As the country debates what needs to happen with our healthcare system, let us not forget this. There are many more lucrative professions for the best and the brightest to choose. We need to continue to make medicine a choice for the best and brightest of a generation, so that our healthcare system stays at the top of the world. We have given up the highest spot in many other fields, but this is one that we should NOT give up.

In the coming administration, with all its hope and challenges, let's make sure we safeguard the doctors in our community. Whatever else must be done, we need to ensure that medicine, as a career and a calling, remains a choice for the finest of every generation in the U.S. Medicine is still about your doctor.

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