

STS.005: Disease and Society in America
First Paper Assignment

Health Care Policy

Due at start of Lecture: 13 October 2005

Your weekly writing assignments have made you a famous health consultant. One day the phone at your Cambridge office rings -- it's President Bush. After joking with you about the Red Sox, he gets down to business. "Doc," he says, "things are getting expensive. We have to rebuild Afghanistan, Iraq, and now New Orleans. We need hundreds of billions of dollars, and I promised that I'd never raise taxes. You don't need a Harvard MBA to realize that I'm in a tight spot. I was looking at the budget the other day and I realized that health care has gotten expensive. When I was born, we only spent 5% of the GDP on healthcare. Now it's 15%. And I don't think we're getting our money's worth."

You ask him to explain his concern about health care. He faxes you some numbers that his advisors have pulled together.

| | Per Capita Income | Per-capita healthcare spending | % of GDP spent on healthcare | Infant Mortality Rate (deaths/1000) | Life Expectancy (at Birth) |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Iceland | \$31,900 | \$3,115 | 10.5 | 2.4 | 80.6 |
| Japan | \$29,400 | \$2,139 | 7.9 | 3.0 | 81.8 |
| Mexico | \$9,600 | \$583 | 6.2 | 20.1 | 74.9 |
| Slovak Republic | \$14,500 | \$777 | 5.9 | 7.9 | 73.9 |
| Sweden | \$28,400 | \$2,594 | 9.2 | 3.1 | 80.2 |
| United Kingdom | \$29,600 | \$2,231 | 7.7 | 5.3 | 78.5 |
| United States | \$40,100 | \$5,635 | 15.0 | 7.0 | 77.2 |

(Data from www.oecd.org)

After giving you a minute to glance over the data, he starts talking again. "I looked at these numbers and had an idea. I think we should cut our per capita health care spending in half, and be like Japan: spend half as much money and get another four more years. I betcha no Democrat has thought of that!" As you struggle to come up with a good response he says, "don't worry, I don't need an answer right now. I'm meeting with my advisors on October 13th, and you can tell me then. Remember, I'm a politician and a scholar. I want to know both what the ideal solution is, and what a more realistic compromise might be."

Drawing on your knowledge of the determinants of health and disease, write a 2000-word (6-8 page) essay that evaluates the President's data and plan.

First, describe some of the interesting patterns and features in the data. Are there clear associations between income, health care spending, and health outcomes? Are there patterns between different countries?

Second, suggest possible explanations for the patterns (or lack of patterns) in the data. Do income and health care influence infant mortality and life expectancy? What other factors contribute to the health outcomes? Think broadly about the range of political, economic, demographic, social, and cultural factors that we have discussed in the course so far.

Third, evaluate the President's proposal and suggest alternatives. If you reject his plan, explain what level of per capita spending in the United States might be justified and what would need to be done to improve health outcomes other than simply cutting spending. Remember the President's parting request: what would be ideal, and what would be realistic.

As you formulate your answers, follow these guidelines:

- You must make a clear argument, defended with correct and relevant evidence. Your essays must be well organized and clearly written.
- You do not need to use all of the data from all of the countries. You can pick and choose data to defend your arguments, but the President might notice if your arguments are undermined by data that you ignored.
- You do not need to do any outside research. However, there is abundant additional data in the lectures and readings.
- We are not looking for statistical analysis: no T-tests, linear regressions, etc.
- You must use material from at least three of the readings covered so far, and your sources cannot all be from the week on Epidemiological Transitions.
- You must use material from throughout the course (early America to present).
- Please cite all sources (course readings, lectures, other readings if any) correctly. If you have any questions, see the information at the MIT Writing Center website (<http://web.mit.edu/writing/>). You can pick your own style (e.g. CMS, parenthetical citations, etc.) -- just be accurate, consistent, complete.

- Please put your name on a title page, but not on any pages of the body of the paper, so that we may grade the papers blind.

Debates about health care policy are extremely politicized. As with the writing assignments, we are not looking for one correct answer. Many different answers, each completely incompatible with the other, could be good answers. You will not be graded on the basis of how closely your answer fits with our own personal beliefs on the subject. Instead, you will be graded on the basis of how well you present a clear, well-reasoned, and well-defended analysis of the data.