

The Evil That Men Do-An Open Letter to President Obama

"The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones".

William Shakespeare

Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 2

Dear President Obama:

Late in a second term, a President's attention often turns to framing their legacy. I suspect you are no exception and have given this considerable thought. You might wish to be remembered for the Affordable Care Act, even called Obamacare, which brought the US closer to universal healthcare coverage. However, I recall the end of President Clinton's second term a short 16 years ago. During that administration the Federal coffers were full; an unprecedented business boom occurred; and foreign entanglements that might have led to war were avoided. However, most of us do not remember those positives, but recall a White House intern and a certain blue dress. As pointed out by Shakespeare over 400 years ago powerful men are remembered not so much for the good they do but the bad.

Robert McDonald, your Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA), was brought on board two years ago to deal with concerns about long waiting times for Veterans Administration medical services-concerns and the subsequent lies that were told to cover it up that led you to fire his predecessor, Eric Shinseki. McDonald was talking to reporters in the week leading up to Memorial Day, when attention always turns not just to honoring America's war dead but to whether the government is delivering services it promised living Veterans. The reporters asked McDonald why the VA doesn't publicly report the date when veterans first ask for medical care so as to better measure waiting times (1). His reply:

"The days to an appointment is really not what we should be measuring. What we should be measuring is the veteran's satisfaction. What really counts is: How does the veteran feel about their encounter with the VA? When you go to Disney, do they measure the hours you wait in line?"

Although McDonald later apologized for his remarks, they were offensive to me as a physician who worked in the VA, and I might point out wrong on several fronts. First, Disney does track its wait times. Second, the remark shows a fundamental disconnect between upper echelon management and healthcare. As we pointed out several years ago, satisfaction with healthcare does not mean better healthcare, in fact, it may mean worse care, perhaps because the focus is more on satisfaction than good care (2). Third, McDonald's remark was truly disingenuous. McDonald is concerned about wait times which led you to fire his predecessor. Otherwise, why would the VA lift the supervision requirement for nurse practitioners which they did later in the week (3)?

The prolonged wait times occurred because an insufferable VA administration created a hostile work environment for physicians. Many left and the VA was unable to replace them. Although salary is part of this, it is less of a problem than those inside the Beltway believe. The VA abandoned its academic affiliations and created a work environment where physicians seeing patients is largely put in the same category as janitors waxing a floor. Middle level administrators who know nothing about healthcare are now directing physicians on what they should do. The goal has become less about healthcare than the administrators being in charge. The replacement of physicians by nurse practitioners is in line with this concept. The goal will not be as much to deliver ***quality*** healthcare, a concept that is often nebulous and hard to define, but rather to redefine quality. For example, replacing timely and good care with a measure such as making sure that on each visit the Veteran is reminded to fasten their safety belt (a current requirement), is certainly measurable, cheap and does not require a physician. In most businessmen's minds it matters little whether it does any good or not. It is a measure of someone's concept of quality and the VA will deliver quality as long as it does not cost too much and an administrator can receive a bonus for it. Based on the VA, many physicians are suspicious that this is the long term goal of Obamacare.

So on this Memorial Day, let us remember our Veterans, Mr. President, and consider your legacy. My view is that unless changes are made, your misdirection of healthcare both at the VA and nationally through Obamacare, could be your White House intern in a blue dress.

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References

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*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado or California Thoracic Societies.