

William Liao  
10/17/2024

## The Right to Healthcare in the USA

Imagine a country where sudden sickness doesn't mean financial ruin and where medical care isn't a privilege but a fundamental right for everyone. In the United States of America, one of the richest countries in the world, millions of people do not have the financial resources to access healthcare that includes regular visits to the doctor, over the counter drugs, and treatment for sickness and disease. We have the ability to change this situation. We can play an important part in our nation's history by supporting an amendment to the Constitution that adds the right to healthcare to the US Bill of Rights.

Portugal recently added the Right to Healthcare to its Constitution. Fifty years ago, the Carnation Revolution ushered in a profound democratic transition, during which commitment to social welfare and equality deepened. This resulted in a 1976 constitutional guarantee stating that all citizens have the right to health protection through a national health service that is "universal and general". Portugal's massive healthcare system is managed by the Serviço Nacional de Saúde (SNS), which is mostly funded by taxes. "Under the SNS, most essential medical services are available free of charge, while non-essential services and treatments require a small co-payment" (Allianz Care). According to an article published in *The Lancet* on the 40th anniversary of the SNS's founding, "Since its creation, there has been impressive progress in Portugal's health indicators. Infant mortality per 1000 live births decreased from 3.3 in 2006 to 2.9 in 2017, and life expectancy of men and women increased by more than 4 years over the same period to 81.3 years (longer than the EU average)."

If the United States were to follow the examples of Portugal and the 73 other countries in the United Nations who have the right to health care as a constitutional guarantee (Wheeler), we would see progress not only in the health of our citizens, but also in the health of our economy, the wellbeing of our aspirations toward equity, and the strength of our leadership among countries around the globe.

Universal healthcare would create a healthy America. In countries with universal healthcare, citizens are more likely to seek medical care, which can lead to better health outcomes and a more productive society. The USA has a lower life expectancy (79.4 years) compared to other developed nations with some form of universal coverage like Canada (82.7 years) and the UK (81.5 years) (Worldometer). If universal healthcare were added to the US Bill of Rights, Americans would live longer and happier lives free of worry about access to necessary treatments and consults.

This right would benefit **all** Americans. Currently, statistics show significant imbalances in health measures along ethnic/racial lines. For example, black Americans have a 30% higher death rate from heart disease than white Americans (Office of Minority Health). Making universal healthcare a constitutional right would show a commitment to breaking barriers and allow our country to address the inequality that holds back not only individuals but the nation as a whole.

Americans would also be more fiscally healthy, as medical debt is a leading cause of bankruptcy in the U.S. In 2019, 116 million Americans faced financial hardship due to medical costs (“Losing Ground”). No one should be put in a position where they have to make a choice between medical care and other necessities like food or rent. By adding healthcare as a right, we would allow Americans to focus on living healthy and fulfilled lives, without having to constantly worry about medical costs that could jeopardize their bank account.

This financial gain will also bolster the US economy. Currently, we lose \$260 billion per year in economic output due to health-related productivity losses (Mitchell and Bates). The connection between worker health and economic productivity is an issue which deserves attention. A healthier workforce is not just vitally important, but it's an economic necessity that could revolutionize America's global prosperity.

Adding universal healthcare to the Bill of Rights would also help the USA align with international norms. Unlike many developed nations, such as the United Kingdom or Denmark, the USA is one of only a few that does not have partial or universal coverage for healthcare.

Adding the right to healthcare to the Bill of Rights will improve people’s health, reduce financial hardship, enhance economic productivity, increase equity, and align the US with other countries. If Americans did not have to worry as much about health-related issues and expenses, think about how much better and more productive our society would be. While it will take hard work to accomplish, adding the right to healthcare into our US Bill of Rights is a necessary goal if we want a happy, healthier, and more just America.

Works Cited

Allianz Care. “Healthcare in Portugal.” *Allianzcare.com*, 2019,  
[www.allianzcare.com/en/support/health-and-wellness/national-healthcare-systems/health-care-in-portugal.html](http://www.allianzcare.com/en/support/health-and-wellness/national-healthcare-systems/health-care-in-portugal.html).

“Losing Ground: How the Loss of Adequate Health Insurance Is Burdening Working Families—Findings from the Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Surveys, 2001–2007 | Commonwealth Fund.” *Www.commonwealthfund.org*,

Mitchell, Rebecca J., and Paul Bates. “Measuring Health-Related Productivity Loss.” *Population Health Management*, vol. 14, no. 2, Apr. 2011, pp. 93–98,  
[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3128441/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3128441/),

Office of Minority Health. “Heart Disease and African Americans | Office of Minority Health.” *Minorityhealth.hhs.gov*, 2023,  
[minorityhealth.hhs.gov/heart-disease-and-african-americans](http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/heart-disease-and-african-americans).

“Portugal - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission.” *Europa.eu*, 2021,  
[ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1125&intPageId=4736&langId=en](http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1125&intPageId=4736&langId=en).

Wheeler, Mark. “A Constitutional Right to Health Care: Many Countries Have It, but Not the U.S.” *ScienceDaily*, 2013, [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/07/130719104927.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/07/130719104927.htm).

Worldometer. “Life Expectancy by Country and in the World (2023).” *Worldometers.info*, 2023,  
[www.worldometers.info/demographics/life-expectancy/](http://www.worldometers.info/demographics/life-expectancy/).