

# Universal Health Care

**F**or years, if not decades, advocates of a government-run, single-payer health insurance system have touted the universal health care provided citizens in many European countries as the model the United States should emulate.

But increasingly, those European health care systems are encountering problems of their own — problems that could reach crisis proportions in the not-too-distant future.

A recent column by John Lloyd, co-founder of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and director of journalism at the University of Oxford, put into perspective the cradle-to-grave medical care systems so common in Western European countries. He warns that the more socialized the U.S. system becomes, the more it will face the same dilemmas as the Europeans. “These dilemmas are all symptoms of the way we live now,” writes Lloyd.

In its simplest terms, the problem is driven by two factors: aging populations and declining birth rates. “In nearly every country, people live longer than they once did,” says Lloyd. “And in most countries, women give birth to fewer kids. He notes that, in 2000, around 16 percent of the population in Germany and the United Kingdom and 12.7 percent of the United States population was over age 65. By 2050, the proportion of the over-65s will be around 20 percent in the United States and the UK and 30 percent in Germany. And more of those folks will be over 80 years old.

“So there will be fewer economically active taxpayers in North America and Europe while there’s a greater need for taxes to pay for socialized medical care,” says Lloyd.

That change in demographics al-

ready is being felt in Europe. In Italy, the UK, Spain and France, cuts of varying depths are now being introduced, writes Lloyd. In France, where the system often is seen as the best, “the budget is exceeded by billions of euros every year. The head of the association of French pharmacies says the system cannot survive more than six years without deep reform.” The director of the Care Quality Commission in the UK says the system there “is on the brink of collapse.”

Lloyd warns that as the aging population increases, some may be healthier than previous generations but others will be fatter, to the point of obesity, and prone to a host of degenerative — and costly — diseases. “Socialized medicine always had a moral hazard tucked inside it,” writes Lloyd. “The healthy citizens subsidize the smokers, the drinkers, the food bingers and the drug takers who occupy the emergency rooms every night.”

Here in the United States, the aging demographic already is showing up in the Social Security system, where fewer and fewer taxpayers are supporting benefits for more and more recipients, many of whom are living longer than ever before.

“Obamacare puts the United States closer to the Europeans in its generous universality,” writes Lloyd, “and closer to the Europeans’ budget problems.”

Even as the Obama administration struggles to deal with the disastrous launch of its online enrollment process, warnings are intensifying that, unless large numbers of healthy Americans sign up, the program will not be sustainable. And so far, whether by choice or because of a flawed enrollment system, those healthy Americans are staying away in droves.