Editor’s Letter

I’m Sick of Politics

March 1, 2011 By Kate Ferguson

Yes, I’m a few years late knowing this, but I never realized people could simply walk into some bodegas (ethnic stores) and buy antibiotics and other kinds of prescription drugs—without a prescription. And, yes, this is illegal—not to mention dangerous to your health.

I found out about this common practice when my friend told me about her unemployed son who got sick right as he started a new job. He really didn’t want to miss his first day there—not in this economy—so he reported for work.

Turns out, the son’s supervisor sent him home. But since he was in the job’s probationary period, he was still uninsured. He couldn’t afford to see the doctor. So what did he do? What many other sick, uninsured folks sometimes do, I learned—at least in New York City. He visited a local bodega and copped 20 antibiotic capsules for $10. (People often mistakenly use antibiotics to treat colds. But antibiotics fight bacteria-caused illnesses, and colds are caused by viruses.)

Do you see how that could be dangerous? But when I thought more about my friend’s son and his precarious situation, I had to ask myself this question: Would I do that if I were sick and uninsured? You bet I would. What’s more, so would a lot of other people too. Would you?

And while it’s true some people might do this because they don’t like going to the doctor, there’s another truth too. Health care is still unaffordable for many Americans.

What’s also telling is that, according to Census Bureau data, the number of people in poverty in 2009 was the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates are available. One in seven Americans live in poverty, as do one in four blacks.

Certainly health insurance costs for poverty-stricken people are too high. The 2003 Congressional Budget Office cited high insurance costs and lack of access to employment-based coverage as the two most commonly reported reasons for being uninsured. And as unemployment rises, it’s a no-brainer that the number of uninsured working-age Americans will continue to grow.

Today, despite President Obama’s efforts to keep his promise of affordable health care for all Americans by 2014, I’m concerned about the Congressional and judicial opposition that threatens

to snatch away this much-needed relief.

Now that the Senate voted against repealing health care reform, there's been talk that the debate about this issue will eventually find its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. And if the country's highest court does take the case, it's said that we could see a decision handed down as early as spring 2012.

I'm hoping we stay the course. Why? Because sick people shouldn't have to self-diagnose and self-treat their illnesses with black market meds, and insured workers shouldn't have to resort to the same tactics because their health insurance premiums put the squeeze on already-stretched paychecks.

I'll stop here. Now I have a big headache.

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