

# Diagnosing the Health Care Crisis

## Media Prognoses and Prescriptions for Health Care in America

Health issues have long been a leading topic of TV news, and health care has become a major campaign issue in the 1992 elections. This month's *Media Monitor* analyzes TV news coverage of the debate over health care in America, including coverage of the AIDS epidemic and the controversy over silicone breast implants. From November 1991 through April 1992 the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts broadcast 386 stories with a combined airtime of 12 hours 25 minutes. This issue also includes an update of our continuing analysis of TV news election coverage.

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### Major findings:

- **AIDS Blitz** AIDS received four times as much coverage as any other health care topic. *Page 2*

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- **TV vs. Reality** TV portrayals of AIDS patients underrepresented gays, minorities, and I.V. drug users. *Page 4*

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- **A Sick System** Six out of seven sources criticized the quality of health care in America, and four out of five feature stories portrayed failures of the system. *Page 2*

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- **Strong Medicine** Three out of four sources criticized the private sector, and two out of three called for a national health insurance system. *Page 3*

### Election '92 Update:

- **Goodbye Clinton** Since early May, Bill Clinton has received less network coverage than Ross Perot. *Page 6*

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- **Hello Perot** TV news has portrayed Perot as a more viable and desirable candidate than either Clinton or Bush. *Page 6*

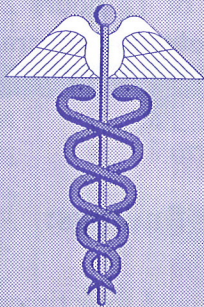
## The Nation's Chart

Harris Wofford's (D-PA) triumph over Richard Thornburgh in the Pennsylvania Senate race put health care reform on the national agenda, just in time for the 1992 elections. During the six months from November 1991 through April 1992, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts broadcast 386 stories in issues related to health care with a combined airtime of 12 hours 25 minutes.

### Top Ten Issues Mentioned

AIDS	156
Silicone Breast Implants	40
Private Insurance	28
Taxes	23
Children's Health	22
Euthanasia	21
Cancer	15
Government Regulation of Drugs	14
Medicare/Medicaid	13
Rising Cost of Health Care	12

U.S.A.



The number of stories in which each issue was mentioned.

The leading health care topic, with about four times as much coverage (156 stories) as any other, was the battle against AIDS. Earvin "Magic" Johnson's November 7 announcement that he was HIV-positive unleashed a flood of stories, frequently involving public information campaigns and educational outreach programs. Second on the health care news agenda, with 40 stories, was the controversy over the safety of silicone breast implants. The high cost and inaccessibility of private health insurance contributed 28 stories. Tax-related issues were mentioned 23 times, including various proposals for individual tax credits and corporate tax incentives to provide health insurance. The problem of assuring adequate health care for the nation's children rounded out the top five topics with 22 mentions.

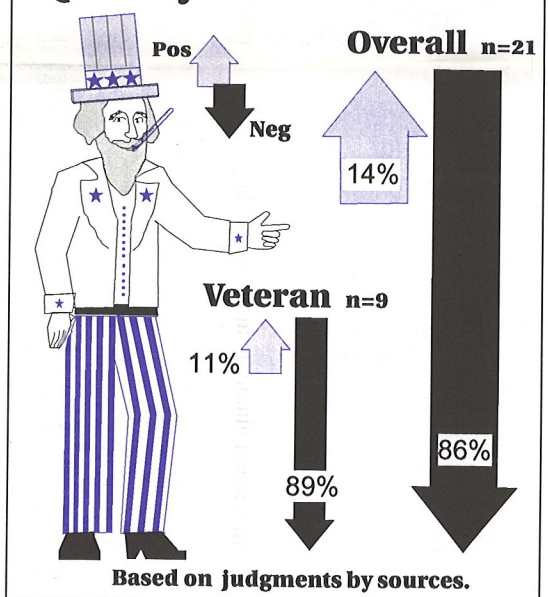
Other frequently mentioned issues included the debate over the right to die, often linked to news about Dr. Jack Kevorkian's suicide machine (21 stories), the ongoing battle against cancer (15), government regulation and testing of experimental drugs (14), proposed modifications to Medicare/Medicaid (13), and the rising cost of health care (12).

### Prognosis...Poor

The media prognosis for the nation's health care woes was uniformly negative. Out of 21 evaluations of the quality of health care in America, all but four (86%) were critical. For example, Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA) told CBS, "Institutionalized racism in the area of health care in general exacerbates the problem of little or no services dealing with this problem of AIDS." (3/25/92) The heaviest dose of criticism concerned the quality of health care available to veterans. For example, CBS reporter Jim Stewart cited unnamed experts as charging that, "the technology provided to the wounded Persian Gulf veterans was horrifyingly inept." (1/15/92)

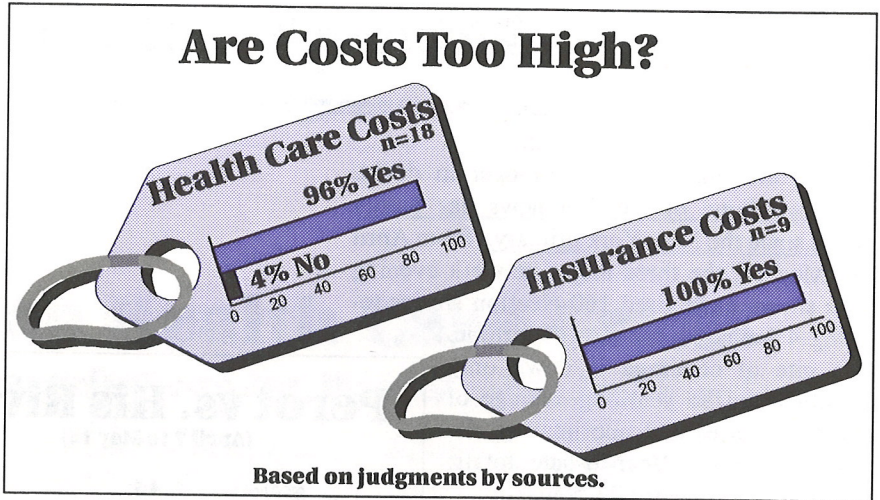
Opinions on the adequacy of federal funding for various aspects of health care were even harsher -- 100 percent negative. Thus, CBS reporter

### Quality of Health Care

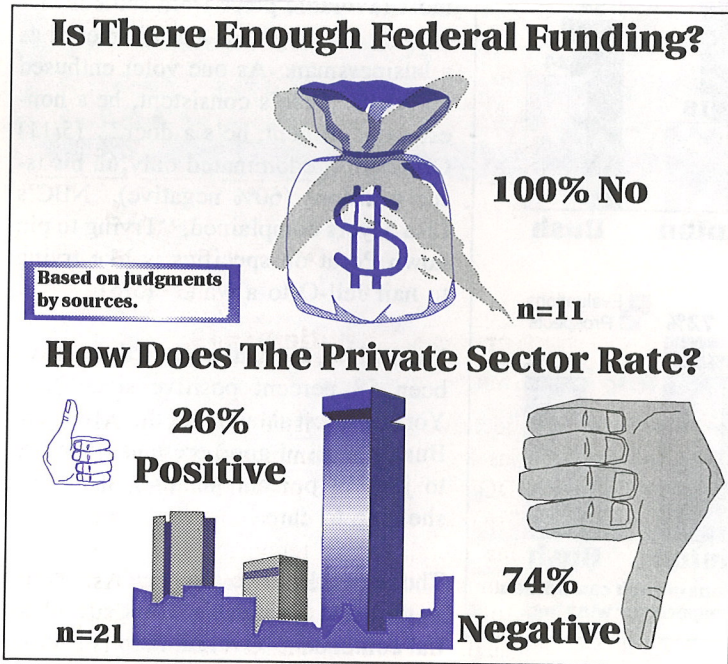


Media Monitor

Richard Threlkeld reported, "AIDS researchers say Washington is not devoting nearly enough money nor effort to finding a cure." (CBS, 11/8/91) Similarly, the president of the American Heart Association complained on ABC, "We're not spending enough money on heart disease and stroke... where dollars could benefit next year thousands and thousands of people." (ABC, 11/10/91) The private sector also fared poorly. Three out of four evaluations of private sector handling of health care were negative. For example, ABC's George Strait reported, "Many hospitals express anger and frustration at what they call the drug industry's arrogant refusal to moderate price increases." (2/4/92)

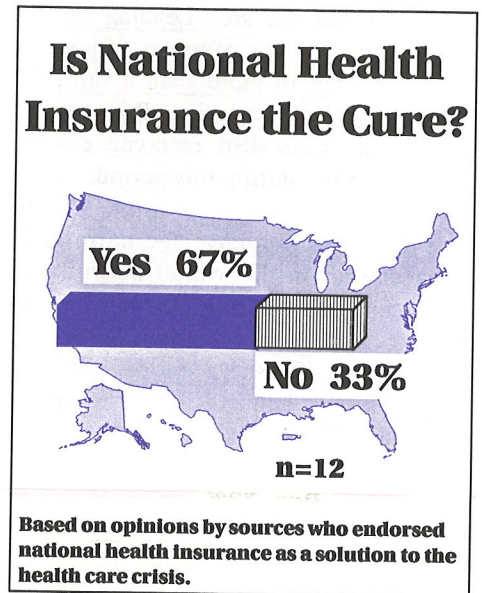


such plan. For example, Iowa Senator (and then presidential candidate) Tom Harkin called for the government to "invest in the human resources of education and a national health insurance program, and then things will start to get better." (CBS, 11/25/91).



We also looked at the increasing costs of health care and health insurance. The cost of health care was judged to be too high by 94 percent of sources. For example, Irving R. Levine concluded, "Medical costs are rising out of control and are putting health care beyond the reach of more and more Americans. Not only poor Americans, but those considered middle class as well." (NBC, 12/30/91) Insurance costs were rated as overly high by all nine sources who expressed an opinion.

When remedies for the nation's health care problems were proposed, the discussion frequently turned to national health care plans. Two thirds of the sources who offered opinions on a national health care system favored some



## No Magic Cure

Magic Johnson's announcement renewed the debate over education efforts aimed at preventing the spread of the AIDS virus. The two most frequently debated methods were the teaching or practice of safe sex, including the use of condoms, and the teaching or practice of abstinence or fidelity. Safe sex education was

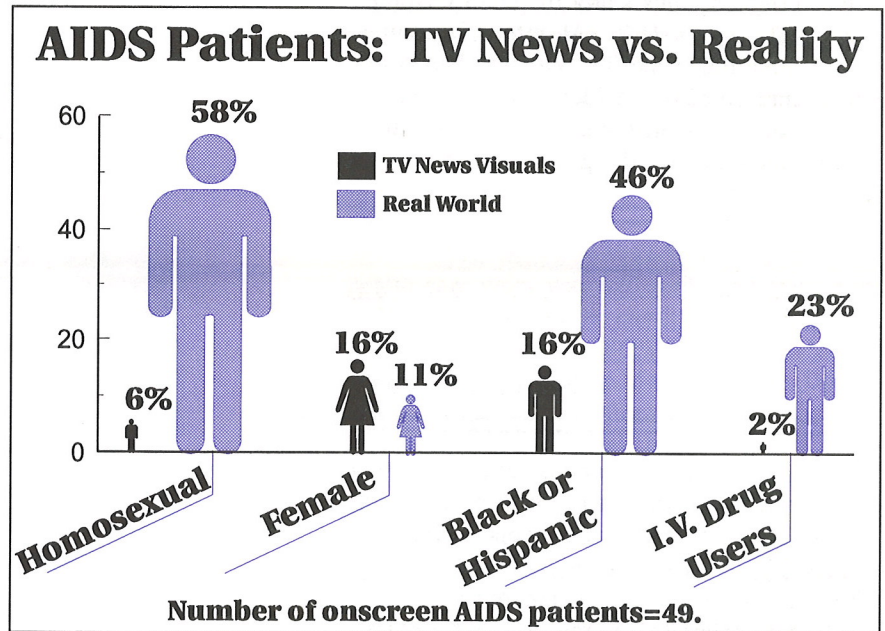
widely debated and usually endorsed. Out of 30 opinions that were voiced, 73 percent supported this option. Even Wilt Chamberlain, the former basketball star who related his sexual exploits in a recent book, joined the chorus: "This is the '90's and AIDS is real and we must be much more selective and we have to practice safe sex." (NBC, 11/8/91)

Abstinence and fidelity received even higher approval ratings (83%) but far less discussion (12 opinions). Supporters of teaching abstinence included a representative from the Family Research Council who told NBC, "The young people of America need to hear very clearly from us that the only way to completely avoid the risk of getting the HIV virus is to delay their sexual activity until they're ready for marriage." (11/9/91)

### AIDS On Camera

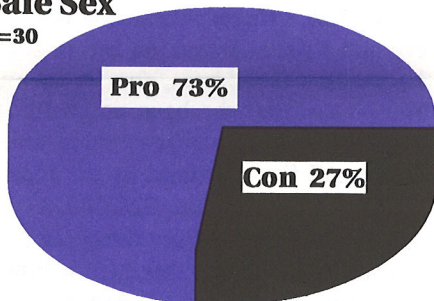
Television communicates through the visual images as well as the words that it conveys. To find out what impressions of AIDS victims the camera conveyed, we noted the

backgrounds of all identified AIDS patients who appeared on TV news, using only information provided in the broadcast. We then compared the traits of TV's visual victims with real world data on AIDS victims compiled by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in their Quarterly Surveillance Report through March 1992.

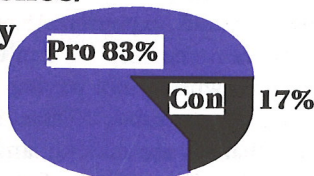


### AIDS Prevention Methods

**Safe Sex**  
n=30



**Abstinence/  
Fidelity**  
n=12



Based on opinions by sources who discussed either abstinence or safe sex as ways to prevent the spread of the AIDS virus.

The results: TV's visual portrait of AIDS victims has little in common with real life. The CDC's reported rate of AIDS among blacks and Hispanics is nearly three times the rate of victims identified on television (46% vs. 16%). Ironically, former tennis star Arthur Ashe's unwilling appearances accounted for half of all visuals of minority AIDS victims. (This comparison excludes Magic Johnson, who was diagnosed as HIV-positive but has not contracted AIDS.) Similarly, only six percent of on-camera AIDS patients were identified as homosexuals, compared to 58 percent of real world AIDS victims. This disparity reflects the fact that the networks rarely identified the means of AIDS transmission to the individuals who were shown.

Another group of AIDS victims who were underrepresented in TV visuals consisted of intravenous drug users. In real life, nearly one in four AIDS sufferers contracted the disease through drug use. But only two percent of those shown on television were identified as drug users. By contrast, one group was somewhat overrepresented in relation to real world

AIDS incidence. Women accounted for 16 percent of those shown on television, compared to eleven percent of AIDS victims in real life.

Thus, the risk groups the news audience sees are very different from their real world counterparts. This repeats the pattern we discovered in our previous study of AIDS coverage five years ago (Media Monitor, December 1987). At that time TV visuals also vastly underrepresented the incidence of AIDS among homosexuals, minority groups, and drug users, and overrepresented the proportion of women with the disease.

### Silicone Scare

After AIDS education, the most heavily debated issue in health care news was the safety and future of silicone breast implants. Thirty-six percent of sources judged the implants to be safe, compared to 21 percent who declared them unsafe. But a plurality of all sources (43%) argued that the safety of the implants was still unclear or unknown.

A majority of the sources who defended the implants as safe were representatives of Dow-Corning, the leading manufacturer of the silicone implants. Typical of these was a corpo-

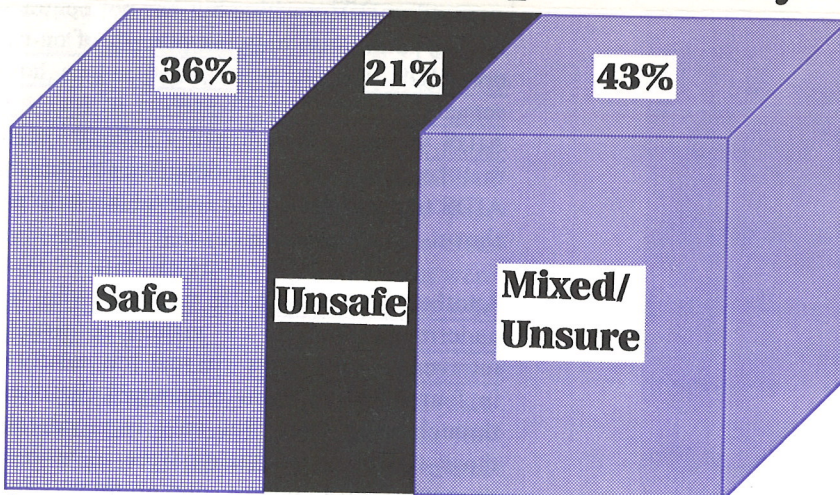
rate spokesman who declared, "We believe that these products are needed, safe, and effective." (CBS, 11/13/91) A majority of those who criticized implants as unsafe were women who had experienced ill effects. For example, one woman told CBS, "I think they're extremely dangerous. And I think eventually over a certain period of time, whether it be a few years or ten years or 20 years a woman is going to develop an adverse reaction to her implants." (4/16/92)

### The Personal Health Beat

The networks personalized the health care debate by including 102 anecdotes about the experiences of individuals in dealing with the American health care system. Overall, these anecdotes produced a downbeat portrait. Sixty-three percent showed patients, families, or companies faring poorly in their interaction with the health care system.

Much of the bad news concerned the workings of the current system of private insurance. Out of 33 anecdotes that illustrated the workings of this system or the dealings of individuals with private companies, 79 percent showed negative experiences. For example, NBC's Robert Hager reported on one family's problems with private health insurance as they responded to President Bush's State of the Union address. Hager introduced the family, "Dave and Kristin Bravocoln had high stakes in the president's address; they're among 35 million Americans who have no health insurance. The Bravocoln's have three children. David's small firm, hit hard by the recession, makes the family about \$28,000 a year." Kristin spoke first, "If anything happens to David, we don't have either health insurance or disability insurance." David added, "At this point in time we simply can't afford it, because it is so expensive." Kristin then explained her choices, "I can't get a strep culture done without not paying a bill or taking it out of groceries. There are decisions like that, that we are making, and I think they are wrong." The effect of such anecdotes was to dramatize the individual suffering that underlies statistics on failures of the health care system.

### Silicone Breast Implant Safety



Based on source statements.

## Election '92: The Perot Factor

The nominations are no longer in doubt, but the volume of election news has hardly abated since the New York primary. From April 7 to May 15, the three major network evening news shows have aired 160 election stories totalling 4 hours 52 minutes of airtime. This rate of coverage is down only slightly from the yearlong average of about 30 stories and one hour of airtime per week. Year-to-date totals: 716 stories and nearly 23 hours.

The riots in Los Angeles sparked an increase in issue coverage. From the New Hampshire primary until the start of the riots, fewer than one election story in four (23%) contained substantive discussions of policy issues. In the days after L.A., however, two out of three stories did so. Leading the way were discussions of urban policy, which appeared in more than a third (35%) of all election stories. Race relations and crime also received enhanced attention during this period.

The shift in election coverage mirrors a broader shift in the overall network news agenda. In April, 35 network stories focused on race relations. From May 1 to May 15, the networks aired 141 such stories, an eight-fold increase in the rate of coverage.

### Enter Ross Perot

The past few weeks have seen a dramatic increase in visibility for prospective candidate Ross Perot. Prior to the New York primary, the networks ran just six stories featuring Perot. Since April 7, they have aired 26 Perot stories, half on NBC and the remainder split between ABC and CBS. George Bush and Bill Clinton have garnered about twice as much coverage as Perot during that period. Since the Los Angeles riots ended, however, the networks have de-

voted more airtime to news about Perot (28 minutes) than Clinton (27 minutes).

Perot's rise to prominence has been accompanied by a burst of good press. Nearly three out of every four evaluations of Perot (73%) have been positive. This positive tone has predominated on all three networks and among both partisan and non-partisan sources (the latter are sources not linked with candidates or political parties). Perot received his most favorable press from sources discussing his character and his record as a businessman. As one voter enthused on ABC: "He's consistent, he's honest, he's diligent, he's a doer." (5/11) Criticism predominated only on his issue positions (60% negative). NBC's Lisa Myers complained, "Trying to pin down Perot on specifics is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall." (5/6)

Meanwhile, evaluations of Clinton have been 58 percent positive since New York, his best showing of the campaign. Bush's level of good press has dropped to just 18 percent positive, his worst showing to date.

The networks have also depicted Perot as the most formidable of the presidential contenders. Overall, Perot's "horse race" coverage (based on evaluations of his prospects) was 82 percent positive, compared to 72 percent positive for Clinton, and just 57 percent positive for Bush. When references to prospects in the remaining primaries were excluded from Clinton's and Bush's totals, they dropped to only 46 and 44 percent positive, respectively. Thus, Perot is the only candidate who is getting a majority of positive evaluations with regard to his chances in the ultimate "horse race" - the general election.

In sum, Bush has maintained high visibility but has also continued to attract heavy criticism. Clinton has improved the tone of his coverage at the cost of losing the spotlight. Only Perot has conveyed an image of visibility, desirability and viability this spring.

