

Our Sick Health Care System

Media Coverage of the Health Care Policy Debate

Health issues are a leading source of news and a growing source of public debate. This month's *Media Monitor* analyzes media coverage of the health care policy debate from October 1990 through April 1991. We examined 447 news stories, including 251 articles in the *New York Times* and 196 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. The topics ranged from AIDS and tobacco to insurance coverage and the costs of health care.

Major findings:

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■ **A Sick System** Most sources rated America's health care services as inadequate. *Page 2*

■ **Cost-Ineffective** Sources unanimously condemned the high cost of both health care and health insurance. *Page 3*

■ **Private Practices** Seven out of eight sources criticized the private sector. Drug companies were the most frequent targets. But insurance companies got 100% bad press. *Page 3*

■ **The National Health** Four out of five sources criticized government health care programs. Only the anti-smoking campaign got a good press. *Page 4*

■ **Faulting the Feds** State-level programs got better press than federal programs, especially on television news. *Page 4*

■ **Medic-Aid** Most sources argued for government intervention. Four out of five urged the government to spend more money on health care. *Page 5*

The Health Beat

Health issues have become a leading source of domestic news. In 1990 the health beat finished fourth on the network news agenda, after the Persian Gulf, the Soviet Union, and the American economy. This month we focus on the policy issues involved in the ongoing health care debate. We examined all stories dealing with health care policy in the network evening newscasts and the *New York Times* from October 1, 1990 through April 30, 1991. This period includes debate over the 1991 and 1992 budget proposals, which highlighted the federal government's role in health care. There were renewed debates over handling the AIDS epidemic as well as concern for mental health care, children's health care and veterans' medical care.

Researchers analyzed 447 stories on health care policy issues. The majority of them -- 251 articles -- appeared in the *New York Times*. The three network evening newscasts aired 196 stories for a total of 5 hours and 34 minutes of airtime. ABC's 79 stories topped the competition, followed by CBS with 62 stories and NBC with 55.

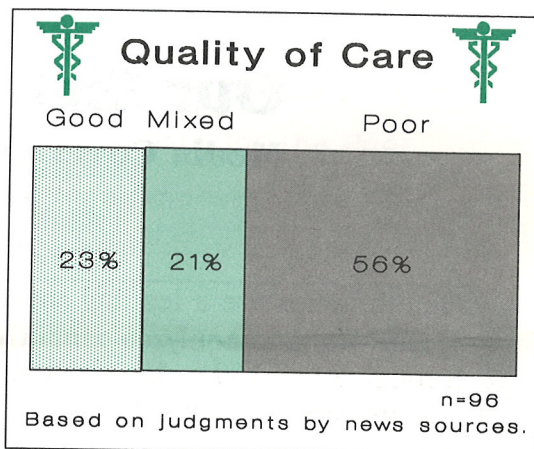
The Nation's Chart

News on health care policy debates was led by the battle against AIDS. Disclosures that health care workers might be infected, along with a widely-reported international conference, helped make AIDS the topic of 84 stories. Debate over the federal budget included changes to Medicaid and Medicare, which were the subject of 57 stories. Providing health care and insurance coverage for America's children was discussed in 55 stories. Women's health concerns were addressed in 48 stories. The costs, availability and security of private insurance policies were debated in 44 stories. The top ten topics also included

Topics	Number of Stories
1) AIDS	84
2) Medicare/Medicaid	57
3) Children's Health Care	55
4) Women's Health Care	48
5) Private Insurance	44
6) Euthanasia	26
6) Smoking and Health	26
8) Costs of Health Care	24
9) Poverty and Health Care	23
10) Medical Ethics	22

Based on number of stories.

the debate over the right to die and the adverse health effects of smoking (26 stories apiece); the soaring costs of health care (24), the problem of supplying health care to the poor (23), and finally, discussions of medical ethics (22).



Hazardous...

There were 96 opinions on the quality of health care that Americans receive. These assessments covered a wide range of services, but in the majority of cases (56%), the quality was found wanting. Among the sources who offered clear opinions, 79 percent criticized the quality of care provided for veterans. Sources held a similarly poor opinion of urban health care (78 %) negative). Only health care services to the poor and members of minority groups attracted worse ratings -- 100% negative. Health care in rural areas and emergency medical services were found wanting by two out of three sources (67%). Prenatal care, health care for women, and community based clinics were criticized by three out of five sources (60%).

Only two areas of health care enjoyed even a modicum of approval in the news: services for the elderly and AIDS programs. Half of those with clear opinions thought that care for the elderly was adequate. Programs to deal with AIDS were endorsed by 60 percent of sources.

... To Your Wealth

If opinion was mixed on the quality of care, it was unanimous on the price. Every source who expressed an opinion on the cost of either health care or health insurance found the prices out of line. Not one of the 32 sources who were quoted attempted to justify the costs of the current system of providing health care. For example, *New York Times* reporter Philip Hilts noted, "The United States health-care system is the most expensive in the world..." (4/8/91) In proposing new Medicare reimbursement rules, federal officials argued, "an explosion of high-cost medical technologies' has made it necessary to consider cost in deciding whether to [pay the bill]." (*New York Times* 4/21/91)

Assessing the Costs

Insurance Costs Too High

100% Negative



n=17

Health Care Costs Too High

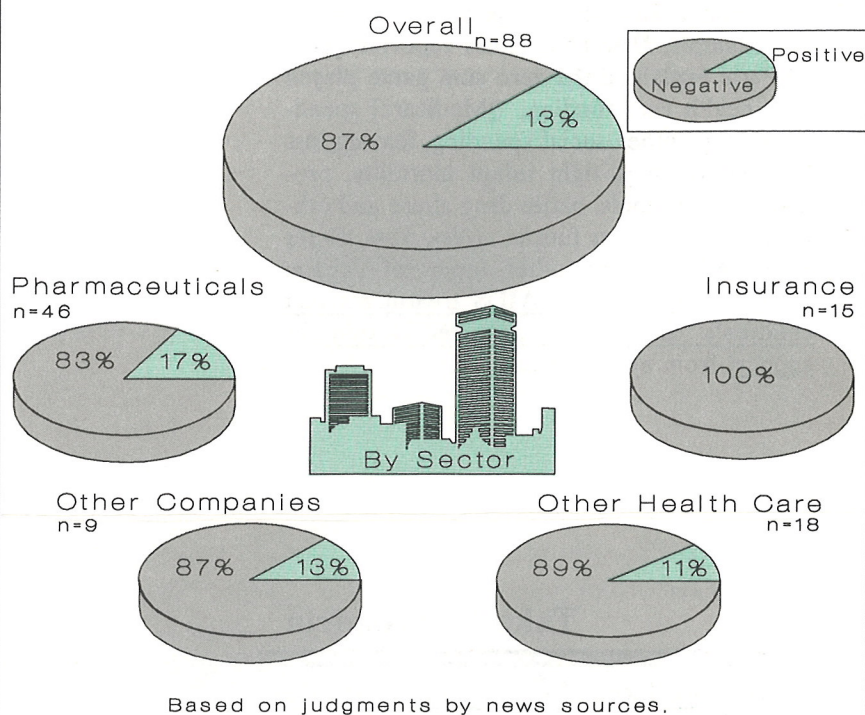
100% Negative



n=15

Based on opinions by news sources.

Appraisals of the Private Sector



Kennedy (D-MA) charged, "Pharmaceutical companies are spending larger sums on questionable tactics that subvert basic medical standards..." (*New York Times* 12/12/90) In another article a U.S. Attorney charged, "The generic drug industry is corrupted by companies that took shortcuts to get drugs approved, including bribing regulators..." (*New York Times* 12/20/90)

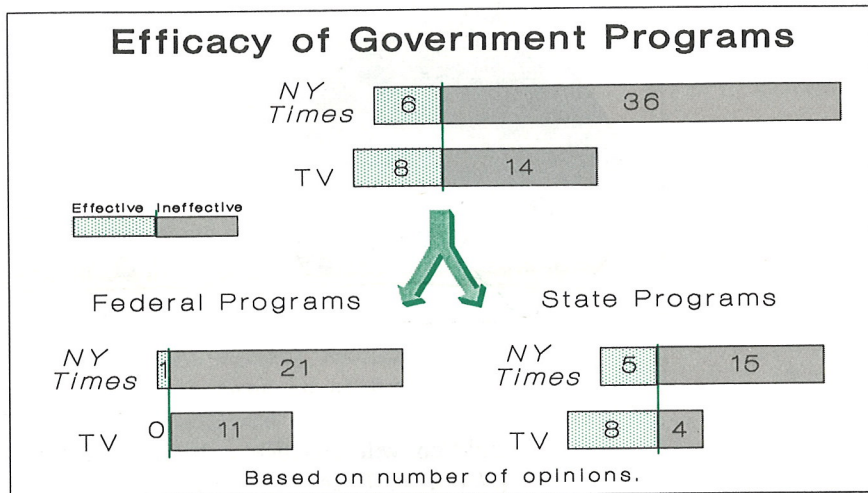
Other companies fared even worse. Almost nine out of ten evaluations of health care concerns (89%) were critical. For instance, a hospital director offered this low opinion of his colleagues: "Some private non-profit hospitals are making unbelievable amounts of money, not paying any taxes and not using the money for research, education or charity work." (*New York Times* 12/18/90). Companies that were not in the health care business did about as badly (87% criticism). Among these, tobacco and alcohol companies were high profile targets. For example, one anti-smoking activist charged, "There is something especially sinister in the way the tobacco companies link healthy sporting life with tobacco." (*New York Times* 4/11/91).

The worst press of all went to the insurance industry, which received universal criticism (100%) on several fronts. Thus, a gay activist

Private Problems

Private industry played the part of a villain in this tale of inadequate and overpriced care. The private sector was criticized for its performance by seven out of eight sources. For the industries under discussion, the coverage ran the gamut from bad to worse. The pharmaceutical industry was the most frequently targeted. Drug companies were the focus of 46 opinions, 83 percent of which were criticisms. For instance, Senator Edward M.

complained, "The private insurance sector has been all too successful at avoiding its share of the costs of AIDS care" (*New York Times* 12/19/90). A doctor observed more mildly, "Insurance is supposed to be about sharing the risk, but nobody wants to share with those who need sharing with." (*New York Times* 4/28/91)



Federal Foibles

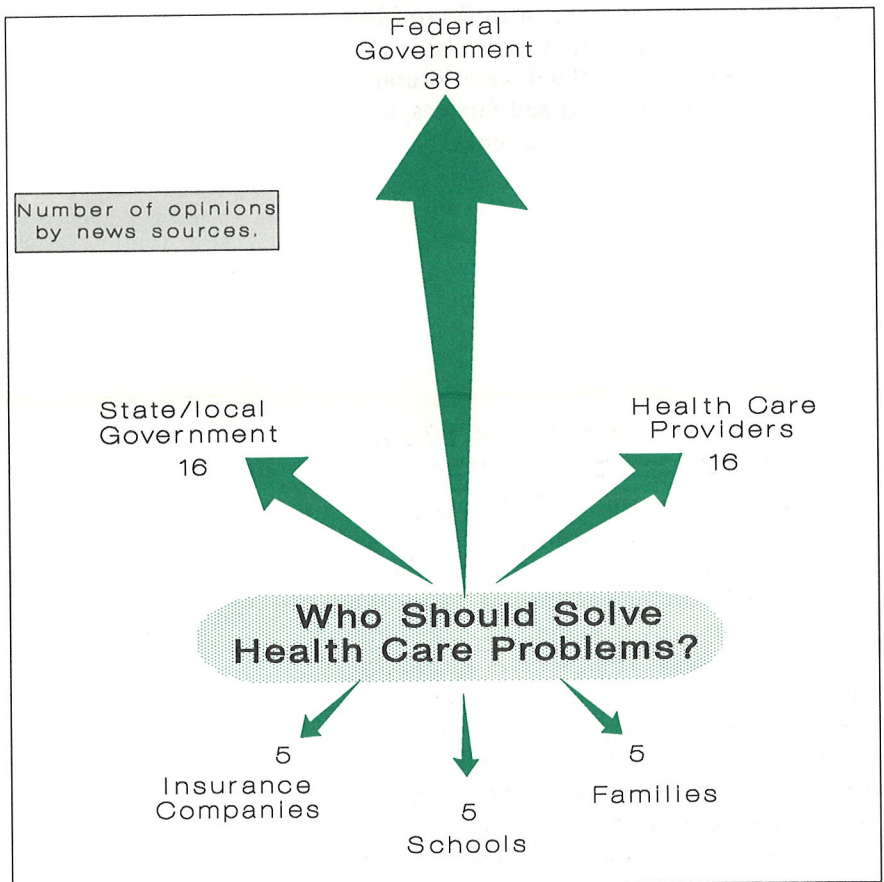
The public sector fared almost as badly as private industry in the court of media opinion. Nearly four sources in five (78%) argued that existing government sponsored health care programs were ineffective. Among the frequently discussed program areas, only one (anti-smoking efforts) was viewed as effective by more than half the sources discussing it. Eight out of ten agreed that Medicare/Medicaid was ineffective. For instance, an insurance executive observed, "Medicaid for the indigent is in a shambles." (*New York Times* 10/23/90) Regulation of nursing homes and government attempts to control health care costs were seen as ineffective by three out of four sources.

Only two government health care initiatives received balanced or positive coverage. First, programs and policies to control the costs of long term care were seen as effective by half of the sources debating them. Second, the media found one bright spot amid the gloom. Government efforts to reduce smoking were seen as effective by three out of four sources. ABC's Brian Rooney noted survey results showing that, "there are 750,000 fewer smokers than there were two years ago, and (gov-

ernment-sponsored) advertisements helped convince people to kick the habit." (11/14/90)

Although the bulk of coverage was critical, government programs fared better on television than in print. On the nightly newscasts, over one out of three sources (36 %) defended the efficacy of existing efforts. In the pages of the *New York Times* only one out of seven (14%) did so. For instance, the consumer advocacy organization Public Citizen charged that the federal government had failed to prevent the dumping of poor patients: "The meager enforcement record represents a serious failure of its responsibility to punish violators" (*New York Times* 4/24/91).

There were also significant differences in the ratings of state and federal government programs. Over two out of five sources (41%) argued that state-level programs were effective. By contrast, federal programs received support from only one of 33 sources, a minuscule three percent positive rating. While federal programs were almost always dismissed on all outlets, state programs received more praise than criticism on television news. Opin-



ion over the airwaves came down two to one in praise of state health care programs. In the *New York Times*, by contrast, three out of four sources criticized state-run programs. For example, a New Jersey state official described the state's method of covering the uninsured as "terminal" and argued "the system is just collapsing." (*New York Times* 11/21/90)

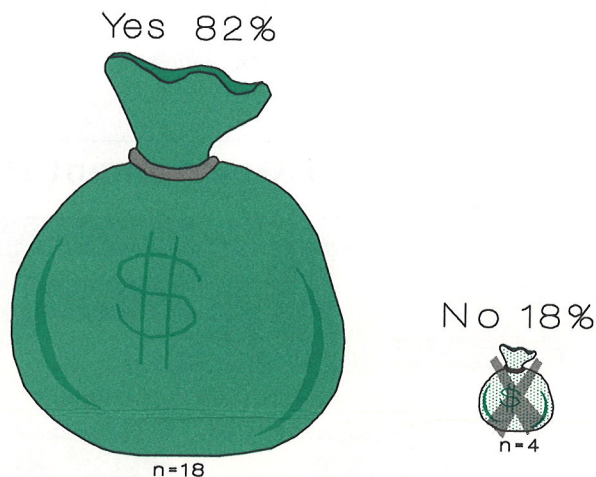
Public Solutions

If government's current efforts were found wanting, it was seen as the most likely source of future improvements. When newsmakers assessed responsibility for dealing with the nation's health care problems, they usually turned to the public sector. The federal government received by far the most attention (38 mentions), followed by state and local governments and health care providers (hospitals and doctors), with 16 mentions apiece. Trailing well behind were insurance companies, school systems and families, each of which were mentioned five times.

A Matter of Money

With so much responsibility being placed on government to solve health care problems, it is not surprising that sources overwhelmingly backed government funding for health care programs. By a margin of more than four to one (82% vs 18%) sources agreed that government should fund health care programs. Most frequently mentioned as deserving funding were methods of handling toxic waste and Medicare/Medicaid programs. A health care policy expert at the Chamber of Commerce typified their thinking, "Expansion of Medicaid to cover additional poor

Should Government Fund Health Care Programs?



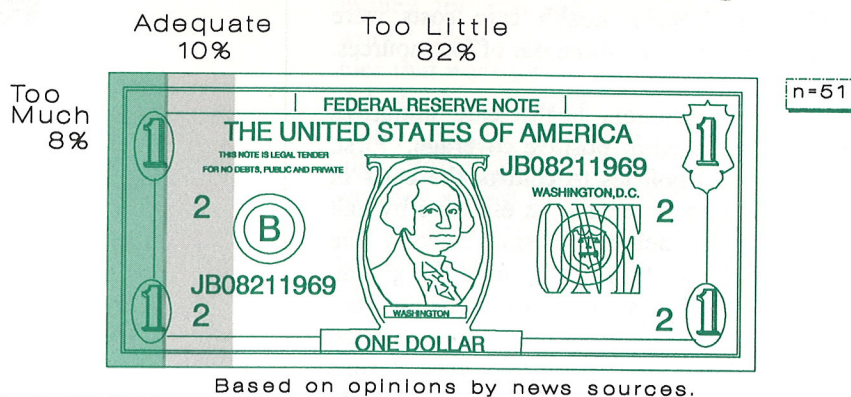
Based on judgments by news sources.

children will produce a better workforce." (*New York Times* 11/4/90)

Just as they endorsed government funding in principle, sources backed increased spending levels in practice. More than four out of five (82%) asserted that government was not spending enough on health care programs. Among the dissenters, 10 percent argued that the current level of government funding was adequate, while eight percent felt the government was already spending too much.

The most heavily discussed areas of funding were the Medicare and Medicaid programs, which were mentioned 18 times. Most sources (83%) found Medicare/Medicaid

Level of Government Funding



spending inadequate, but some argued that government was already spending too much. For example, *New York Times* reporter Jason DeParle explained the zero sum game played with health care funding, "[Medicare] spending cramps other social spending, leaving less to build housing, fight infant mortality, provide better schools, battle drug abuse and otherwise invest in our future." (*New York Times* 10/12/90) Among other topics of debate, increased spending on AIDS treatments and children's health care attracted unanimous support from news sources.

Take Two Aspirin

A major focus of news coverage was the search for solutions to America's health care problems. We identified over 1,000 proposals covering almost 200 different ideas. Among this vast group, solutions focused most heavily on five areas: proposals to control the costs of insurance and health care, health care services for children, remedies for the AIDS epidemic, reforming Medicare or Medicaid, and health services for women.

Of the 205 proposals to control the costs of health insurance or health care services, the most common were: standardizing so-called "medigap" policies to make them more affordable (16 mentions), utilizing medical review panels to control the number and cost of procedures (14 mentions), reducing the number of mandatory services included in group insurance policies, requiring employers to provide health insurance, and creating a state sponsored insurance plan for the uninsured (each mentioned 12 times).

Suggestions to improve children's health care focused on: programs to distribute condoms to control disease and pregnancy (52 mentions), improving childhood immunizations (24 mentions) and teaching children to abstain from sex (12 mentions).

Proposals for handling the AIDS epidemic were the most headline-grabbing set of solu-

Top 10 Solutions



tions, with proposals heavily focused on testing health care workers. All told, 76 proposals suggested some form of testing and procedural changes for infected health care workers. More controversial solutions ranged from government dispensing of clean needles, condoms and bleach supplies to drug users (10 mentions) to barring people with the HIV virus from entering the U.S. (11 mentions).

Companies in the News

	Number of Stories
Blue Cross/Blue Shield	17
Metropolitan Life	10
Burroughs Wellcome	7
Traveller's Corp	6
Aetna	5
Philip Morris Co.	5
Roussel-Uclaf	4
Prudential Insurance	4
RJR Nabisco	4
Bristol-Meyers Squibb	4