

Point of View:

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Care comes to the city of Angels

BY GENE R. NICHOL

CHAPEL HILL - August has certainly been the month of the spirited town hall meeting. Many thousands have foregone the beach in favor of giving their congressmen, or even their president, a piece of their mind. "A sleeping giant" has been "awakened," a young woman in Lebanon, Pa., made clear to a bemused Sen. Arlen Specter. Rep. G.K. Butterfield saw rare anger in Rocky Mount. Amazingly, Sen. Tom Harkin, and then Sen. Claire McCaskill, were branded "communists" by constituents. Elsewhere, hundreds of others shouted "liar, liar" in unison at their representatives.

Pictures of the president were defaced. Nazi parallels were traced. Acting as if health-care reform were un-American, opponents chanted "USA, USA, USA". Red-faced hecklers barked disdain for the "socialism" of universal coverage. Fights erupted. "Hands off our health care" was the most frequent refrain. Apparently to emphasize, a man in Portsmouth, N.H., stood outside Obama's meeting with a gun and a threatening sign. This is, apparently, the summer of someone's discontent.

Meanwhile, last week in Los Angeles, health reform of another sort was under way. A marvelous Tennessee-based organization, Remote Area Medical, held a massive, eight-day free clinic at The Forum in Inglewood. Having put together mobile, volunteer, charitable clinics for 25 years in Appalachia, Latin America and on the Gulf Coast, the docs, the machines and the medicine came, for the first time, to the city of Angels. They weren't lonely.

The unemployed, the uninsured and the underinsured came by the thousands. Many slept in their cars in the parking lot -- waiting for two days to get a golden ticket. Organizers had expected a good crowd. After all, L.A. County is 22 percent uninsured; huge numbers have lost their jobs; and California just kicked a lot of folks off Medicaid. But nobody had ever seen anything like this.

One doctor said he expected to see such desperation on his volunteer jaunts to the Third World. "I never thought I'd have to do this for people in the United States." Roughly 2,000 were served a day. Many more had to be turned away.

Stories reported in the local press were wrenching. Elizabeth Simms, 46, had an abnormal Pap smear a year ago. But she'd been dropped from MediCal, so she had been unable to follow up with treatment or another examination. Debra Johnson had worked for a brokerage firm for 20 years, before being laid off. Getting treatment for her eyes was a luxury she now couldn't afford.

Verna Pierce was laid off two years ago. She eventually dropped her COBRA policy because she couldn't afford the premiums. "I'm not a deadbeat," she cried, "there are no jobs." A cancer patient had been "maxed out" by her HMO. Adele Burgarella, 62, divorced, with diabetes, said "I'm so ashamed. I didn't think I'd be like this in my old age." Carol Myers of the L.A. County Health Service concluded this "absolutely reinforces what we already know, the current system of health care in the United States is broken."

Remote Area Medical's inspiring founder, Stan Brock, was perhaps modestly worried about the publicity. "We've now gotten requests from all 50 states" to host similar ventures. And, he fretted, there are often not enough volunteers or resources. Doing the South proud, he said "We tried to get a waiver to bring in good ol' East Tennessee boys and girls to do eyes and teeth, but they won't allow practitioners from one state to cross over and help in another."

As the L.A. clinic was under way, Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama made the tour of Sunday talk

shows, railing against reform. "We have the best health-care system in the world," he drawled -- and we're not "going to have people waiting in lines or getting rationed."

I suppose, senator, it depends on where you look. I'm not sure the 600,000 (14 percent) of your Alabama constituents with no health care coverage of any kind would agree with you. And I'm certain the thousands on line in the parking lot of the Forum have a different view. I'm glad they're not carrying guns.

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