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### **Compassionate care**

An 87 year old woman is brought to the emergency room of a small Chicago hospital. She has had a stroke. She is unresponsive, stops breathing, and is intubated and connected to a ventilator.

Later it turns out that she has not had a stroke at all. She was brought by her daughter from another state and has been demented for seven years. She has no papers, no visa, no insurance. She came to the US 20 years ago as a visitor and stayed on. One of her daughters collects public assistance for her two children. She also had no visa and was to be deported, but the order was vacated on grounds that she had not had adequate legal representation. She then married an American to obtain a green card and soon after that divorced him. The other daughter has a visitor's visa and visits her native country three times a year to maintain her visitor's status.

Six months go by, or more. The little hospital, always teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, has run up a bill of almost \$2m (£1.1m; 1.6m). The woman is still on a ventilator. She needs special nursing, frequent turning, skin care, tube feeding. Administrators, lawyers, and ethics committees are deeply involved. The finance officer is tearing his hair out. The daughters want everything done and believe she will recover if given massive doses of antibiotics. They at last agree to have her transferred to a nursing home, but only provided that the hospital pays for her care. An announcement goes out that the woman has left. Many predict that she will be back soon.

She is one of thousands of "undocumented" patients receiving care in America (it is politically incorrect to call them illegal aliens). They come for open heart surgery, chronic dialysis, cancer treatment, hypertension, or diabetes. They come across the long Mexican border, by boat from the Caribbean, as visitors from Africa, Asia, eastern Europe. They are directed, as by a hidden hand, to hospitals that it is known will not refuse them. They sometimes arrive there directly from the airport. They often bring their doctors' reports, x rays. Renal patients come with functioning catheters ready to have dialysis. Others go straight to the cardiac lab. They all receive care. They never leave. They cost taxpayers billions of dollars. Who says that the American healthcare system is not compassionate?