

Reforming health care: calling for Mr Yeltsin



The man at the health club, working himself back into shape, is indignant because the hospital charged him \$3200 for a 50 minute outpatient hernia repair. Anaesthesia "standby" cost him another \$500, even though he had no anaesthetic, and there will also be a

bill from the surgeon. But it is the hospital bill that he is most angry about, even though he is covered by insurance. It's a rip off, he says, and he represents not the 35 million uninsured but a silent majority of employers and employees tired of paying huge insurance premiums. In an election year the public demands some kind of action, but nobody quite seems to know what to do.

President Bush, though committed to bring the staggering costs of health care under control, has not come up with any strong medicine, preferring to reform the system gradually. The Democrats, taking

advantage of public dissatisfaction, are more radical. Mostly they would like some form of national health insurance and many are enamoured of the Canadian system, where mortality rates are no higher, coverage universal, and costs lower. To this their opponents reply that government programmes invariably become wasteful, bloated, and inefficient. They point to the long surgical waiting lists under "socialised medicine" and warn that such a system in this country would have the compassion of the taxation department and the efficiency of the postal service, at Pentagon prices.

Yet many liberal democrats continue to press for a health system funded out of taxes and managed by a central bureaucracy. Unfazed by the momentous changes in eastern Europe, they seem to espouse Mr Gorbachev's view that only Stalinism has failed and that socialism remains a desirable goal.

Others, meanwhile, wonder how bad (or expensive) things have to become before they will get better. A few have suggested that we need less of Mr Gorbachev and more of Mr Yeltsin, that the system is beyond redemption and needs to be done over again.

Abolish malpractice litigation, all regulatory bodies, quality assurance and review programmes, the bureaucracy and the useless paperwork, and the absurdity of one tax supported public institution sending bills to another. Do away with defensive medicine and the need to order computed tomography for every 18 year old with migraine. Make the public understand that doctors cannot pursue every diagnostic possibility and sometimes must play the odds. Stop keeping alive the people who have no chance of ever recovering. Do something about the thousands of coronary bypass operations that have never been shown to prolong life. Do away with most of the administrators, planners, health advocates, lobbyists, ethicists, sociologists, legal advisers, public relations officers, and desk bound doctors and nursing directors. And reform the educational system so that young doctors do not graduate \$200 000 in debt and are driven into high paying specialties. And when all this is done cut the surgical and endoscopy fees once more. A tall order. Most likely too much even for Mr Yeltsin.—GEORGE DUNEAE, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA