

Make Money off my Sickness...Please

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Last May, Senator Paul Wellstone said of pharmaceutical companies, "We have an industry that makes exorbitant profits off sickness, misery, and illness of people and that is obscene." In a literal sense, he is right: health care providers do make money off our sickness, just as the food industry makes money off our hunger. But the food industry doesn't make money by keeping us hungry; it makes money by feeding us. Similarly, the health care firms make money, not by keeping us sick but by making us well.

One day five years ago I was unable to keep liquids in my body, and I lost almost ten pounds in less than twenty-four hours. My wife took me to the hospital, where I was put in a nice quiet room in a clean, wonderfully comfortable bed, and an intravenous device pumped about eight pounds of fluid into my body. I slept twenty-two of the next twenty-four hours. The bill for one day, slightly over \$2,000, was mostly covered by my health insurance. But I would have gladly paid every penny. My doctor later told me that, had I stayed home that evening, I might have died. For the next few months, whenever I drove by that hospital, I cheered. The men and women working there don't know me but spent their best energy making me well and, maybe, saving my life. And, however much they like helping people heal, they would not have been there if someone hadn't paid them. They made money off my sickness. Bless them.

And thank goodness countless other strangers all around the world are working late at night in labs, trying and trying again to find drugs that will cure sicknesses that I, or those I care about, will probably have in the future. What motivates many of them, besides their belief in their work, is that a drug company is paying them. What motivates the drug company is the large revenue it can earn by developing drugs that cure diseases and save lives. We live in a wonderful time, a time when we can realistically dream of curing diseases that we so far have had to accept. I sure as hell do want people making money finding cures for my sicknesses.

I'm angry at Wellstone for pushing for a new Medicare drug benefit. Medicare now sets price controls on hospital care and on doctors' care received by the

elderly. No matter how much the elderly are willing to pay for such services, the federal government won't allow them to pay more than it decrees. The result is that older people, even if they are willing to pay, often can't get the medical care they want. If the federal government begins a drug benefit, I predict that within ten years it will forbid the elderly from paying more than its stingy rates. Price controls will discourage development of new drugs, which could cause me, or you, to die needlessly. Now that's obscene.