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Opinion: **Kamala Harris: Everyone Gets Sick. And We Deserve Better.**

What my mother's death taught me about the health care system America needs.

By **Kamala D. Harris** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamala_Harris]

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- Dec. 29, 2018

Everyone Gets Sick. And We Deserve Better.

By Kamala D. Harris

“...Dealing with hospitalizations and terminal illness is tough enough without having to worry about insurance...”, Kamala D. Harris writes.

In 2008, our mother asked my sister, Maya, and me to meet her for lunch. [A] When we arrived, our mother didn't seem like herself. We wondered what was going on. Then she took a deep breath and reached out to us (both) across the table.

“...I've been diagnosed with colon cancer...” - she told us.

I know, that many can relate to the emotions I felt in that moment. Even just reflecting back on it now fills me with dread. It was one of the worst days of my life.

The hard truth is that every one of us will go through an experience like that - sooner or later. Whether, it is coming to terms with a loved one's terminal illness or experiencing our own. My mother was a breast cancer researcher.[B] She understood, from a career of looking at cancer cells under a microscope, that no matter who we are or where we are from,

our bodies are essentially the same. They work the same way — and [they] break down the same way, too.

She got sick before the Affordable Care Act [C] became law; Back when it was still legal for health insurance companies to deny coverage for “pre-existing conditions”. [D] I remember thanking God she had Medicare.[E]

That’s something [that] I’ve been thinking a great deal about - in the days since a federal district judge in Texas, ruling in a lawsuit filed by a group of Republican governors and state attorneys general, declared the Affordable Care Act unconstitutional. This was not the first attack (by Republicans) on the law; But, if upheld, it will be the most catastrophic.[F]

Without the protections of the A.C.A., Americans with “pre-existing conditions” could be denied health insurance; And, insurance companies would - once again - be allowed to “*discriminate*” based on age and gender. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, more than 50 million Americans could be rejected for coverage by health insurers if the A.C.A. were to disappear. [G]

At the same time [if we lose the protections of the A.C.A.], people in their mid-20s would get kicked off their parents’ [health insurance] plans. “Lifetime caps” [H] could come back. “Out-of-pocket costs” would no longer be capped. [I] The expansion of Medicaid - in dozens of states - could be reversed. The human toll would be unthinkable, with some experts estimating that 20,000 to 100,000 people could die each year.[J]

We must fight with everything we have to avert this catastrophe. And, as we do so, let’s also accept the truth that even with the Affordable Care Act intact, our health care system still needs fixing. [K]

Let’s acknowledge that there are nearly 30 million Americans who still

don't have health insurance.[L] And, there are plenty more who have insurance, but can't actually afford the rising cost of health care.

I am so grateful my mother had Medicare [M], and I will fight for it to be guaranteed to all. I was among the first senators to sign on to the Medicare for All bill [N]when it was introduced last year.

There should be nothing “*partisan*” [O] about wanting a system where health coverage and care are based not on how much money you have or where you live. We need a [healthcare] system with the goal of good outcomes rather than the goal of high profits. It [such a system] would save countless lives, and according to recent studies, [P] could trim as much as \$5 trillion in health care costs over 10 years.

I believe that health care should be a right. But, the reality is [that] it [healthcare] is still a privilege in this country. We need that to change. When someone gets sick, there is already so much else to deal with: the physical pain for the patient, the emotional pain for the family. There is – often - a sense of desperation — of helplessness — as we grapple with the fear of the unknown. Medical procedures already have risks. Prescription drugs already have side effects. Financial anxiety should not be one of them.

Logistics, alone, can be overwhelming. I remember that as my mother's condition worsened, she needed more care than we could provide. I wanted to hire a “home health care aide” for her. [Q] But my mother didn't want help.

“I'm fine. I don't need anybody.” - she would say; Even though she could barely get out of bed. There was “*a fight to be had*”; But, I didn't want to have it. Her body was giving out. The medication was making it difficult for her to function, to be herself. I didn't want to take her dignity away.

So, we muddled through. I cooked elaborate meals for her, filling the house with the smells of childhood; Which [these smells] reminded us

both of happier times. When I wasn't at the office, I was most often with her: telling stories, holding hands, and, helping her through the misery of chemotherapy. I brought her hats - after she lost her hair, and soft clothes to make her as comfortable as I could. [R]

At one point, one of her doctors pulled me aside. "How's my D.A.?" The doctor asked. [He was] referring to my role as the elected prosecutor of San Francisco.[S] The question caught me off guard. I had been so focused on my mother's well-being; I hadn't made room for anything else. I started to choke up. I was scared. I was sad. Most of all, I wasn't ready.[T]

The doctor asked me if I had heard of "anticipatory grief." [U] I hadn't. But, the term ["anticipatory grief."] made perfect sense. So much of me was in denial. I couldn't bring myself to believe that I was going to have to say goodbye. But, underneath it, I was aware. And, I had started "*grieving*" for my mother already.

She ended up in the hospital not long after that. That was when I started to see another change. For as long as I could remember, my mother loved to watch the news and read the newspaper. When Maya and I were kids, she'd insist we sit down in front of Walter Cronkite [V] each night before dinner. But suddenly, she had no interest. Her mighty brain decided it had had enough.

She still had room for us, though. I remember [that] I had just entered the race for California attorney general; [W] and, she asked me "...how it was going?..."

"Mommy, these guys are saying they're going to kick my ass," I told her. [X]

She rolled over and [she] looked at me and unveiled the biggest smile. She knew who she'd raised. She knew [that] her fighting spirit was alive and well - inside me.

My mother died on Feb. 11, 2009, two months after her 70th birthday. One of the last questions she asked the hospice nurse was, “Are my daughters going to be O.K.?” She was focused on “being our mother” until the very end.

And, though I miss her every day, I carry her with me wherever I go. I think of: The battles she fought! The values she taught me! Her commitment to improve health care for us all. There is no title or honor on earth I’ll treasure more - than to say I am Shyamala Gopalan Harris’s daughter. [Y] As I continue the battle for a better health care system. I do so in her name. [END]

[Z] Kamala D. Harris is a Democratic senator from California and the author of the forthcoming book “The Truths We Hold: An American Journey,” from which this essay is adapted. A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 30, 2018, on Page SR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Sickness Comes for Us All

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