

Interview with Kathleen O'Connor

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HOST: Speaking of health care issues, it has been a terrific topic and one that can send you to the Roloids if you think about it too long. What has happened to our health care system? I've had some very up close and personal experience with that. My mother is currently in the hospital and dealing with insurance companies, doctors, lack of communication and what seems to be a system that is really, really having some trouble. And there are so many people here and I thought it was very interesting, when you hear the president of Iran, which we did last night - a whole other topic - but in one segment, President Ahmadinejad talking to Mike Wallace on 60 minutes last night during an interview, referenced our absolutely failing - our, meaning our U.S. failing healthcare system and how many people here are uninsured. Made him sad, he said. I'm sad when I hear how many Americans don't have health insurance. The Iranian president is telling us that, I for one am afraid. I don't like it.

Here to talk a little bit about what Oregonians are doing about that is my next guest and I would like to introduce her to you. Our broken health care system, Code Blue Now, Oregonians Kathleen O'Connor, welcome to the show.

KATHLEEN O'CONNOR: Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

HOST: Thanks for joining us. A big old setup there. I don't know if you saw that interview last night, but truly the Iranian president -

O'CONNOR: I did not, but I'm just dumfounded.

HOST: He's sad about the current state of our healthcare system. So am I. Talk to me about this organization, first of all, and what you do there.

O'CONNOR: Code Blue Now?

HOST: Yes.

O'CONNOR: We're a national grass roots, nonpartisan organization dedicated to giving the American public a voice to change the healthcare system.

HOST: Now, what - I guess I want to start with - because we can say health care and really just throw a dart anywhere and start there, but there are some huge problems. Let's start with how many people don't have health insurance.

O'CONNOR: Well, in Oregon, 600,000 people don't have health insurance. In the United States, that 45 million don't have health insurance.

HOST: Forty-five-million people.

O'CONNOR: Yes.

HOST: And we are - at last count, and correct me if I'm wrong, Kathleen, we are the only industrialized nation in the world that does not have healthcare for all of its citizens.

O'CONNOR: That's correct. Not only that, but we pay \$6,500 per person for every man, woman and child in this country and in terms of that investment, we're 37th in the world for our [indistinguishable] and the quality of our care.

HOST: I know. And the argument - I know there are very strong lobbying groups, not the least of which are insurance companies and CEOs of hospitals. And there are, I mean, maybe you can tell me more about this. What are the forces that are keeping us from doing what other industrialized, civilized nations are doing?

O'CONNOR: I think we're in the middle of a blame and gain mood. When it comes to healthcare, everybody's blaming each other for the horrible health care costs. And the fact of the matter is, we've just never sat down as a society and decided what we want for a health care system. We backed into employer-based health insurance in World War II. We couldn't give raises to our employees who were moving the ships that we needed to win the war and the Keizer Ship Yard went over to Congress and said, can we give health insurance? And they said, sure, and we've never revisited that decision. So we're the only country where your healthcare benefits depends on

your job, your age, your income and your health status. And because we don't cover everyone, it's complex. We have a blame and gain battlefield and people are, you know, really nice people are turning against each other for economic survival.

HOST: And there's a lot of misinformation.

O'CONNOR: Oh, yeah.

HOST: That's troubling, too. I mean, I'll hear people often say, you know, those opponents of some sort of a tiered system of health care or something that would cover all folks and people always will go to, you know, taxes. And you can point to some of the countries that have very good systems in my mind, like Scandinavia, like some of the -

O'CONNOR: France is number one.

HOST: France is number one. But people will always say, but look at the taxes they pay. And you know what? If you look on the surface, they do look to pay more taxes than we do. But if you count everything that we pay for here in America, we're paying way more, way more.

O'CONNOR: We're paying way more. We're paying way more. And the fact of the matter is, it's hardly, you know, 50 cents to the dollar actually goes for patient care. All the rest goes for, you know, the bureaucracy and the complexity. I mean, it's so complex. It's so micromanaged, that if you took out that complexity of the micromanagement and actually provided services, people could actually get the care that they need.

HOST: Yeah, and -

O'CONNOR: It doesn't take, you know, rocket science to do this.

HOST: What does it take?

O'CONNOR: It takes the political will and it takes the ability to, you know - it takes the people who say this is what we want in a health care system, this is what we want for health care here in our community, here in our town, and here's how we want it to work for us and this is what we want it to do. Ninety percent of the

American public wants a health care system that's based on health promotion, disease prevention and wellness. Yet 80 percent of our doctors are specialists, so we don't have that. So there's a total disconnect between what the people want and what the system is right now. And that's what Code Blue Now is all about, is giving the people a voice because they have never had that voice in health care reform. It's always come from somebody giving them a plan. Here's a plan, what do you think? And they've never asked the public what they want.

HOST: Yeah, and I think that was true with the senior medication proposals that obviously were just a disaster.

O'CONNOR: Oh, Medicare Part D.

HOST: Yeah, Medicare Part D.

O'CONNOR: A disaster.

HOST: And it's almost as though nobody stood in the shoes - or maybe they did - of the elderly or folks that were actually going to have to use these services, and saw how this was going to not work. I don't know.

O'CONNOR: It's one of the worst pieces of legislation I've ever seen.

HOST: Well, Code Blue Now is trying to do something different. Talk to me in specific terms about what you're trying to do and specifically what our listeners can do.

O'CONNOR: Well, specifically what we're trying to do is engage the public with a meaningful discussion of what a health care system should do, what they want it to do, what it should look like, and what outcomes that they want. We're partnering with organizations that share these ideas. You've got a great United Way there in Eugene. They've got a 100 percent access project going on there. They think that they can solve - they can't completely solve the problem in Eugene, but they're going out and, you know, working with organizations, provider groups, to see that they can find as many medical [indistinguishable] for people as possible. And there's - what we're trying to do is work with organizations, you know, like United Way. We're

talking to the Grange, we're talking with the League of Women Voters and people who really are real citizens in their communities who want the health care system to work for them and their organizations. We have on our web site an opinionaire [sic] that you can go on line for, on our web site, www.codebluenow.org <<http://www.codebluenow.org>> . And then the opinionaire is up there and we have a whole series of questions about what do you think is important in healthcare. What do you want as an Oregonian to have for a health care system in your state and your community?

HOST: And what will happen with this information?

O'CONNOR: Well, we're trying to get it out to as many people as possible. And then we're going to have - will tabulate the results in probably mid to late September and report back to the politicians and the press. This is what the people in Oregon want. This is what they say they want for themselves, for their families, for their businesses in their communities.

HOST: And no more speculating.

O'CONNOR: Yeah.

HOST: So have your voice count. Now, listen, Kathleen O'Connor is joining me from Code Blue and - Code Blue Now, I should say, and she's also written a - this is very interesting to me - the book, *The Buck Stops Nowhere, Why America's Health Care is all Dollars and no Sense*. And we don't have a ton of time left, but I'd love to know the gist of that. You talked just a little bit about it, but what's going on that it's all dollars and no sense?

O'CONNOR: Well, if you look at it, the whole health care system, you know, largely is all about money; who gets it and why and how you get your health care benefits is all through your employer. It's not to say that we should throw the employer out, but let's just take a look at what we want this to accomplish. I mean, we're a very practical minded, problem solving people and the health care system is one of the bigger messes around. And everybody's pointing to everybody else and saying this is why it's so expensive rather than sitting down together and trying to solve a problem, which is what Americans do best. You know, we want to get

somebody to the moon. Yeah, we can figure that out. And so the Buck Stops Nowhere was an attempt to kind of open up the blame and gain battlefield we have in health care right now and show people how it is that way. But more importantly, it tries to move to what we can do about it. And we finally - a group, a number of us became so concerned that we started Code Blue Now.

HOST: And you can visit the web site. We're out of time. I want to just give it out one more time; www.codebluenow.org <<http://www.codebluenow.org>> . And let your voice be heard. Kathleen, thank you for joining us this morning. I appreciate that. Kathleen O'Connor from Code Blue Now. Thanks for the good work that you're doing.

O'CONNOR: Thank you.

HOST: Appreciate it. All right. Can't wait to get the results of that to find out more about it.