

How to slap a happy face on life's misery

COURTLAND
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A recent federal report on racial disparities in health care was quite uplifting to read, sort of like a State of the Union address on medical treatment.

As Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson sees it, the disparities in health care aren't so bad, and the situation is getting better every day.

"Never before have Americans had so many primary care providers, specialists, hospitals, and health plans from which to choose," says the report, which was released by HHS last week. "Except in the most remote frontier areas, some form of

health care is available, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."

And if you're living in a remote frontier area, like, say, Southeast Washington, where access to health care dropped precipitously with the closure of D.C. General Hospital, you can take heart from this:

"Recognizing the superiority of the U.S. system, patients come from around to globe to benefit from health care available nowhere else," the report says.

Now doesn't that make you feel better?

The National Healthcare Disparities Report was supposed to be a comprehensive look at inequalities in health care and the reasons for them. An earlier draft of the executive summary found that the problem was national in scope and that race played a major role.

Thompson didn't like the tone, however. He wanted disparities played down and successes played up.

"That's just the way Secretary Thompson wants to create change," said Karen Migdail, a spokeswoman at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the HHS unit that prepared the report. "The idea is not to say, 'We failed, we failed, we failed,' but to say, 'We improved, we improved, we improved.'"

It was the old glass half-full instead of half-empty — except that if you looked more closely at the glass, you found that it was pretty much empty.

Consider an example of "success" cited in the HHS executive summary: Asian and Pacific Islanders, American Indians and Alaska Natives have a lower-than-average death

rate from all types of cancer.

Inside the report, however, statistics suggest that we hold the applause. A review of the American Indians and Alaska Natives served by the Indian Health Service found that their infant mortality rate was 24 percent higher than for the overall U.S. population; the rate of death from alcohol-related causes was 67 percent higher; from diabetes, 318 percent higher; from accidents, 180 percent higher; from suicide, 92 percent higher; and from homicide, 110 percent higher.

Could it be that cancer death rates are lower among American Indians and Alaska Natives because fewer of them live long enough to die of cancer? But, hey, that's such a downer.

Let's look on the bright side. If the Bush administration can propose a plan to

allow more air pollution and call it a "clear skies initiative" and encourage more logging and call it a "healthy forest initiative," why can't Thompson close the racial disparity in health care by ignoring it?

"In effect, they white-washed the issue away, even though they were told that health care disparities are a national problem and pervasive and carry a significant personal and societal price," Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.) told *The Post*.

Obviously, Waxman is not a true believer. He noted that problems mentioned in the summary tended to be those that are "less alarming." The summary says some people didn't get their cholesterol checked as often as they should, for instance, or that they used hospitals for primary care.

More serious findings were

omitted from the final draft. The omissions include: Blacks and poor people have higher-than-average death rates from cancer; late-stage breast cancer and colorectal cancer are more likely to be diagnosed in minorities than in white people; and racial and ethnic minorities and poor people have an above-average risk of dying of HIV.

Before anything can be done about such problems, they must be acknowledged. Then again, maybe HHS is banking on the problem taking care of itself. The report says, "People of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and racial and ethnic minorities have in the past [italics added] experienced poor health and challenges in accessing high quality care."

But it's better now. A lot of them have already died.

COURTLAND MILLOY is a *Washington Post* columnist.

Rape is still rape regardless of the victim's situation

By Bill Fletcher Jr.

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

Let me start with a basic fact. I am a parent. Perhaps, as a result, I am overly biased. When I opened the paper the other day and read a story about how a Kansas judge had determined that homosexual rape of a child is worse than heterosexual rape of a child, I found myself stunned in disbelief. That's right.

This judge concluded that a more severe imprisonment is warranted for homosexual rape because a legislature has the right to encourage and preserve the traditional sexual mores of society.

If I understand the judge's point of view correctly, the raping of an under-aged girl by an adult male is somehow better (socially and perhaps psychologically?) than being raped by a lesbian because at least she is reminded while she is being raped by the man that in this society relationships are supposed to be between men and women.

On the other hand, the raping of an under-aged boy by an adult man, if I am still following the judge's thinking, should warrant a stronger sentence because U.S. society allegedly has an interest in discouraging homosexual behavior. Did I get that right? Is there another interpretation?

I am not sure whether Judge Henry W. Green Jr. of the Kansas Court of Appeals has ever met any rape victims. If he had, it would be inconceivable that he could or would write such a ridiculous opinion. Rape is about power and punishment. It is about abuse. It is not about sex; it is about demanding submission. Whether such an attack comes in the form of heterosexual rape or homosexual rape should not make a bit of difference. Both acts should be punished equally.

If my child were raped by someone of the opposite sex, heaven forbid, am I suppose to breathe a sigh of relief that it was at least not a homosexual attack? What sort of absurdity is that?

Judge Green's ruling is one more attack, not only on gays and lesbians, but more directly on women. The judge's ruling has the effect of reinforcing what women hear all the time about rape: it will not happen if you don't provoke it...if you are not flirtatious...if you do not give way to your sensuality.

In other words, the problem is always that of the woman's rather than acknowledging that rape is about domination. The judge's opinion is compounded in its stupidity and insidiousness because the case involved illegal sex with a minor. Thus, those most vulnerable are being told that their victim-hood is somehow of less importance if it is the result of one form of attack rather than another.

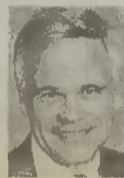
Judge Green should be asked to immediately step down from the bench and then be compelled to serve as a volunteer in a rape crisis center for the duration of his natural life.

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What should Edwards do now?

D.G. MARTIN



"What would you do now if you were in John Edwards' shoes?"

A friend of mine asked me this question a few days ago after another string of primary victories by John Kerry.

Before I could open my mouth, my friend let me know that he had the answer to his own question.

"If I were Edwards, I would get out right now. He has shown the country that he is a good campaigner. He has made a name for himself. But the handwriting is on the wall. Kerry has the nomination wrapped up. Edwards is in a good place right now, with a good shot at the vice-presidential nomination. But he has to show people that he is no fool either. He needs to demonstrate that he 'knows when to fold them.' If he keeps on going, his money is going to dry up. He won't be able to compete financially. So he will be without the resources to organize and buy TV time. Kerry will clobber him, and by convention time he will be 'damaged goods.'"

My friend stopped to take a breath. But before I could jump in, he was off again.

"He just needs to be realistic. And the Democrats need to unite behind a single candidate if they're going to give any hope of beating Bush this fall."

With that, he walked away, grabbed somebody else, asked him the same question, and gave him the same lecture. Maybe my friend is right. But if I were Edwards, I would hang in there as long as I had enough gas money to travel from one state to another.

I think keeping Edwards in the race is the best thing for him and for the Democratic Party's chances of beating President Bush in the fall election.

From Edwards' standpoint, he is connecting with the public everywhere he goes. He

continues to get constant daily favorable press coverage. He shows his strongest asset—a great campaigner—even when he loses. The longer he stays in, the longer the folks will remember him. The longer he stays in the public eye, the more likely it is that he will be able to secure a big-time national position that will give him a platform from which to make a strong bid for public office again someday. The day he leaves the presidential race is the day he will join Dick Gephardt, Joe Lieberman, and Carol Moseley-Braun, and Wesley Clark in the oblivion that belongs to also-rans.

From the Democrats' standpoint, Kerry still needs a strong opponent in the remaining primaries. He still has not had a long enough time in the spotlight to prove that he is strong enough to withstand the Republican onslaught that will face him or another nominee in the fall. Something strange could always happen under the spotlight that falls upon a presumed nominee, that same spotlight brought down Howard Dean. It could show us something about Kerry, his record, his past, his personality, or his wife and family that turns us off.

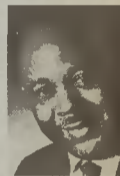
Even assuming that Kerry withstands the scrutiny that comes to a front runner, a few more weeks of competition with Edwards will make John Kerry an even better candidate. It already has.

With Edwards in the race, Kerry has the imperative to continue hard campaigning in the upcoming primary states, and the national news will continue to cover the competitors. When those contests are over, John Kerry is going to have to work hard to get on the national news every evening—at least until the opening of the Democratic National Convention in July.

In summary, the best thing for the Democrats and John Kerry is for John Edwards to hang tough. And even if it were not the best thing for Democrats and Kerry, I would still bet that John Edwards would stay in the race until it is over.

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What to do about Haiti?

That Caribbean country, already the poorest in the Americas, is — again — on a mad dash to chaos. As of this writing, at least 47 people had been killed in violent demonstrations against the government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and it was generally acknowledged that the majority of the protesters had voted for Aristide.

Government forces managed to forestall a major demonstration set for last week by erecting huge, blazing barricades. But rebels remained in control of some eight towns, including Gonaives — significantly, the starting place for the 1985 uprising that led to the ouster of the dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

The government's police force is ill-trained and poorly equipped, and there is no army because Aristide disbanded it for deposing him in 1991. He returned to Haiti from his American exile in 1994, with the aid of about 20,000 American troops, and finished his term. Barred from seeking consecutive terms, he ran again in 2000. Legislative elections that his party won are widely seen as corrupt. It is a thoroughgoing mess. So what should we do?

Doing nothing, the Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy told me when I put the question to him, is not an option. The former D.C. congressman and current president of the National Black Leadership Roundtable in Washington pointed out that the hordes of refugees certain to be headed for American shores may be the least of it.

The corruption and instability of the island, he said, have encouraged organized crime, and Haiti looms as a major shipment point for illegal drugs bound for the United States and elsewhere. Unless the chaos can be headed off, he warned, Haiti's problems will become the problems of the Americas.

Unhappily, he says, we may have come to the time for his eighth step: establishing Aristide in comfortable exile.

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