

Health Affairs

At the Intersection of Health, Health Care and Policy

Cite this article as:
Drew E. Altman
Profits Before Health: An Insurance Tell-All
Health Affairs, 30, no.3 (2011):531-532

doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2011.0157

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Profits Before Health: An Insurance Tell-All

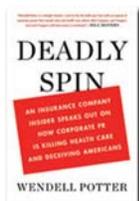
BY DREW E. ALTMAN

DEADLY SPIN: AN INSURANCE COMPANY INSIDER SPEAKS OUT ON HOW CORPORATE PR IS KILLING HEALTH CARE AND DECEIVING AMERICANS

By Wendell Potter

New York (NY): Bloomsbury Press, 2010

277 pp., \$26.00



Wendell Potter is a health insurance company executive turned whistleblower and regular guest on the cable channel MSNBC. He has written a very readable—and sometimes riveting—account of how the health insurance industry advanced its interests in the recent debate on health care reform, as well as how it operates on a day-to-day basis.

According to Potter, the industry's goal, then and now, is to maximize profit at the expense of Americans' health. He details how these vested interests use spin, third-party advocates, front groups, charm offensives, selective disclosure of information, and disinformation to influence public opinion and policy debates in our political system. But the book contains no smoking gun or startling revelation and is mainly a rich narrative describing the types of activities that most people envision occurring all the time, even if they don't know the details. As a "tell-all" book, it

fails to tell us much we did not already know or could imagine.

What Potter does do, successfully, is to take a health care reform debate that was obscure and even incomprehensible to many people and make it read almost like the script of a good movie. In fact, an especially compelling part of the book is about a movie: Potter's account of how the industry organized a public relations campaign to prevent Michael Moore's film *Sicko* from mushrooming into a movement for a single-payer health care system. The notion that the movie could have done something like that might seem fanciful, but it underscores a theme to which Potter returns time and again: The health insurance industry operates like the government's Department of Homeland Security, leaving no threat unattended, big or small, and ready to use any tool at its disposal to snuff threats out.

As political analysis, the book is one-dimensional. During attempts to reform health care, certainly other factors were at play beyond the public relations tactics of one industry: partisanship, Republican opposition and electoral politics, ideological differences in the country, presidential leadership, congressional politics and procedures, old-fashioned lobbying, and much more. Implying that the Obama administration was somehow duped by the insurance industry, as Potter does, is an especially questionable interpretation of Washington politics.

Surely the administration—and the advocates of health reform on Capitol Hill—knew exactly who and what they were dealing with when they sought a bargain with health care's major industry groups to move the legislation forward. It is silly to think that the president and his advisers were fooled by the health insurance industry or were naïve. Rather, they made a judgment about what was necessary to advance legislation that had never been enacted before in our country. It was a deal that

some agree with and some do not.

Also, although *Deadly Spin* doesn't dwell on this, the other side in the health reform debate also had its public relations machine. In making its case to the American public, it kept pretty strictly to messages about what it thought would be advantageous about health reform, and no one has accused it of the kind of deception and manipulation that Potter recounts in his book. True, it was probably less successful in selling its health reform message than it might have been. But at the end of the day, public opinion has not changed much since the debate began—despite the constant efforts of both sides. Public opinion remains roughly split on the law, echoing partisan and ideological divisions in the country generally. In *Deadly Spin* we see only the insurance industry and the political Right doing the spinning.

An especially interesting part of Potter's book is his discussion of the role of the news media during the health reform debate. As he points out, none of the insurance industry's tactics that he describes would have worked as effectively as they did if the news media had been doing their job of shining a bright enough light on them and exposing them for the falsehoods and manipulations that he is sure they were.

Whether Potter's detailing of events is 100 percent accurate or not, the media did too often become a part of the process during debate, echoing the most extreme claims made by all sides and elevating issues and phrases such as "death panels" and "government takeover" to the center of debate. (Potter, by the way, has a nice discussion of the origins of the term *government takeover*, which—no surprise—was carefully tested by opponents of health reform before they began to use it widely.)

At one point Potter quotes Alex Jones from Harvard University's Kennedy School as saying, "We could be heading for a well-informed class at the top and a

broad populace awash in opinion, spin, and propaganda.” I am not so sure about the “well-informed class at the top” part, but Potter is right to raise this issue. The news media are supposed to be our bulwark against the public relations tactics he describes, whether the tactics are employed by an industry group, a political organization, or someone else.

In the end, the biggest contribution of *Deadly Spin* is not Potter’s exposé of industry tactics; whether the industry is health insurance or big oil or anything else, such tactics are pretty common in our political system. Instead, his contribution is in how he uses his discussion of industry tactics to reframe the fundamental question about what kind of health care system we should have.

That is a question that Americans dis-

agree about sharply. Potter clearly is among those who do not like the bargain that was struck with the industry groups in the course of health reform. He favors a more expansive law with a robust public option, and he is among the roughly 21 percent¹ of the public who think the law does not go far enough. More broadly, he would like to take the for-profit health insurance industry out of the equation altogether. His perspective is pretty one-sided—after all, government-run health care systems have their downsides, too—but he is right to raise the larger question of what type of system we want.

Potter’s broader theme is the threat of corporate power in America, and as we debate bank regulation and the freedom of corporations to make unrestricted

political donations, this is certainly a hot issue in our country. But just how much does Potter’s portrait inflate the power and clout of the industry? For one thing, an industry this powerful and ingenious should be able to do a much better job of controlling health care costs than it has managed to do thus far. ■

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NOTE

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. Kaiser Health Tracking Poll—November 2010 [Internet]. Menlo Park (CA): KFF; 2010 Nov 9 [cited 2011 Jan 27]. p. 3. Available from: <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8120.cfm>