Chapter 18

The Coming Storm
Health System Planning Versus Free Market Enterprise

ANTHONY PIEL

Today, it has become an almost commonplace observation that, in the short space of barely one century—the 20th—the world has witnessed and enjoyed a most extraordinary advance in human health and development, unmatched in thousands of years of previous human history. It is generally assumed that this rate of progress, this acceleration of history, will continue in the 21st century. But will it?

Health Development Progress is a Fact

Our anecdotal sense of extraordinary progress is confirmed by current scientific studies and statistical reports by numerous national authorities as well as international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations (UN, UNDP, UNESCO, and UNICEF), the World Bank, and other public and private institutions. Since World War II, the data show that people are living longer: average life expectancy (as a proxy for overall health status) has nearly doubled. On average, people are better fed, housed, clothed, and educated. New and better medical technologies are available. People suffer from fewer scourge diseases, many of which have been eliminated or controlled. As a result of these successes, the nature and perception of health threats, needs and priorities has shifted.

People Demand a Right to Health

When people in one country, or in one part of a country, or living “on the wrong side of the tracks,” see the health, education, and social benefits that others
enjoy, they seek those benefits themselves—as a matter of right. They may not expect identical or absolutely equal rights, but they do demand at least an “equitable” right to “equal opportunity” and access. Such “natural” rights have been affirmed by many of the world’s leading social philosophers as well as religions. Such basic human rights are enshrined in national and international constitutions, charters, and declarations. Thus, the Constitution of the World Health Organization (signed by some 193 Member States) asserts that: “The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being.” (Note that “highest attainable” standard implies that the right to health is an evolving, moving target.)

Two Critical Questions Now Confront Us

At the outset of the 21st century, we have to ask ourselves, realistically, two questions: (1) Can we keep up the rate of progress in world health development that we have enjoyed in the 20th century, and (2) if so, can we ensure that the benefits will be made equitably available to all? The answers are far from obvious, notwithstanding the fact that most of the cards at hand would seem to be stacked in favor of success. We need to take a closer look at the main factors behind our health development success to date, and then consider the main systemic constraint that may stop us in our tracks: lack of political will.

Economic and social development was, and is, one of the primordial factors in health improvement. Already in the late 19th century, well before the discovery of “germ theory” and “silver bullets” in medicine, the industrial revolution began to bring new means of production, consumer products, a wider range of foods, jobs, income, better housing, education, public water supply, heating, electricity, and new forms of enterprise and means of transportation, on land, sea and air. The industrial revolution also brought new problems—pollution, overcrowding, immigration, exploitation, and other forms of social inequity that had to be overcome. Now, the 21st century brings us a further revolution as well as opportunities in informatics, communications, automation, and new ways of commerce. These, too, bring direct benefits, jobs, income, and opportunity. So, in principle, the potential outlook for accelerated economic and social development is good.

Scientific and technological development was, and is, of critical importance to health improvement. Much of the health development success in the second half of the 20th century was directly attributable to advances in basic medical research leading to new technologies with specific applications for disease prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and cure. We owe our thanks to developers of new drugs, vaccines, pesticides, medical instruments, laboratory equipment, quality controls, and standardized hygienic practices. (A widely recognized milestone earlier on