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Reality check

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

My 82-year old father-in-law is a retired dentist who stays active by helping the poor get access to doctors. Last Saturday, he told me he was worried: a volunteer health group was offering free care over four days at the Forum, a sports arena once used (and filled) by the Los Angeles Lakers. His concern: not enough people would show up.

Turns out this was not a problem.

As reported Wednesday in the Los Angeles Times, people camped out overnight to get a good spot in line and a shot at some decent health care. On day one of this four-day event, 1,500 people made their way into the Forum, where dozens of volunteer doctors, dentists, nurses and other medical professionals stood ready to help.

People were turned away, went outside and began camping out all over again for a better spot on the next day's line. These were not just what some might call the hard-core indigent: an unemployed grocery clerk was there, waiting for a desperately-needed root canal surgery; a former auto mechanic wanted someone to examine his chronic back pain.

My father-in-law was there among the dozens of dentists, helping perform an increasingly stringent triage. At first, the volunteers took on all comers. Soon enough, though, they refused people needing root canals on molars -- too time consuming. Within a couple of hours, as the lines continued to grow, they stopped offering root canals altogether -- and then soon most other kinds of dental surgery. Care was focused on quick work that could cut back on pain and stop further spread of infection. Anything more complicated would have to be put off.

These free-care days in Los Angeles are being organized by a group called the Remote Area Medical

Foundation. It's original mission was to bring health care to the poor towns of Appalachia, and has since taken its mobile medical vans to rural sections of Mexico and South America. But now, acknowledging that the medical crisis has spread far beyond that initial mission, the foundation is bringing its services to the second largest metropolis in the nation.

This scene at the Forum is being played out, of course, as a picture-within-a-picture -- accompanied by saturation coverage of outraged citizens over-running town halls and protesting health insurance reform as steps toward socialism and government-mandated euthanasia.

The contrast is nearly bi-polar in its schizophrenia. Which nation are we? And if we are both, how does anyone, any program, address that reality?

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