

# A Letter to the Country from an Emergency Physician

**Dear America,**

I am an emergency physician with an apolitical message in this rather politically charged, polarized time in our country. I have worked for some time in this profession, and have noticed a disturbing trend about which I must speak out — the growing number of emergency department scenarios in which the selfishness and entitlement of those without real emergencies drown out the quiet suffering of those in real need.

This morning a middle-aged woman came into the emergency room in cardiac arrest. ACLS was performed to keep her alive. Other patients were in the ED before she even arrived, certainly with what they felt were emergencies, but treatments for these individuals were placed on hold as this event took precedence. After 75 minutes of continual heroic measures and life-saving interventions, with her grief-stricken husband crying, holding her hand for the last time, and stroking her face, she died.

This was no movie, no reality TV show. This was as real as it gets. Real life and real death. Family huddled around the bed to say their goodbyes and wished they or we could have done more.

I walked to my office, emotionally drained and exhausted, and from across the emergency department another patient, upset that she had to wait, spoke out brashly in tones that carried to every room in the department. “I know someone’s dying and all, but I am in real pain here.”

What most of America don’t know is the emergency department staff are graded with a nationally based report card by hospital administration. A survey is sent only to those who are discharged from the ED, not to those who actually needed admission to the hospital for an emergency or to those, like this new widower, whose loved one passed. This survey is a customer service tool used to see if people like coming to our ED and asks whether we did a good job. The ED staff know this survey is skewed because of the population to which it is sent, and certainly it is not the only tool hospital administrators use to evaluate us. That is another topic for another time.

But you must understand, the real emergencies are rarely graded or surveyed; they only go to those vast hoards of folks who were sent home, many of whom did not get their narcotic medication refilled, like Ms. “I’m-in-real-pain-here” who

screamed her needs for all to hear, just within earshot of a new widower.

Mitt Romney recently was secretly taped speaking to his party base about the 47 percent of the nation that feels entitled to health care, to homes, to handouts, and to ever-present help from the government. If this lady represents that 47 percent, I have a few things to say.

The widower and his wife were also in need of care and financial aid. They came to the hospital for emergency care and received it. He was gracious about it, even when the scenario ended in a way he did not want. He and his family were thankful for the care. They will not be asked how they felt the care was, but screamer lady will be. It is doubtful that screamer lady would have been happy short a lifetime supply of narcotics, free ambulance rides, meals, and immediate gratification of all perceived needs. In fact, she and her friend raided the refrigerator for food and beverages without asking permission of staff or being cleared for eating or drinking prior to her labs and tests returning.

This widower and his family behaved in a way that acknowledged that there were others in the ED. They realized a limited but adequate number of doctors and staff were available. They were calm in the face of a real emergency, but never acted as though the world should stop for them, even though it ended tragically. They knew how to play fair even though their real emergency was not fair.

We live in a society that David McCullough Jr. describes as rewarding mediocrity because everything *demands* fairness and equality. Everyone is special, so nobody is. Everyone should get a prize for participating. And even though Johnny didn’t win, we’re going to give him a trophy for trying because he is special, too. Competition is bad because there is a winner and loser, and that’s not fair. This fundamentally wrong notion breeds false equality and ultimately false fairness and entitlement. We do no one a favor by preaching this. We are lazy parents if we can’t find a constructive way to celebrate the winner and help our children be happy for him. Instead, we have chosen an easier road: to make all things fair and equal. If nothing can rise above, be more important, or be first, then all must be mediocre. If all must be fair and equal, all will assume the position of being just as important and just as entitled as everyone else despite the real emergency or the real need.

The government mandates I evaluate and treat everyone who steps foot in our emergency department, regardless of the ability to pay or the acuity of the complaint. The government has passed health care legislation that makes it so everyone must have insurance. Now everyone is equal, everyone is the same — the broken physically, the broken emotionally, the broken spiritually, the broken psychologically, and even the broken culturally. Many have primary care doctors, but they storm the ED at 2 a.m. with the Burger King entitlement of having it their way rather than waiting for their own doctor to see them the following day. They will demand to be treated equally regardless of the acuity of their emergency. And you know what? They will probably get it because we don't want a bad report card from the feel-goods upstairs intent on establishing great PR or the lawyers who will use government mandates to take away your pain and make the other guy pay.

Were I to say something to screamer lady about her behavior, she likely would fall back on the clichéd finger-pointing canard, and say, “You're a doctor. You are well off. You don't understand. You can't relate. And you are the one responsible for the high cost of health care. It's your fault.”

As a young, married medical student, my family and I participated in Medicaid because having insurance was a requirement for my rather expensive medical school. I felt grateful, not entitled, to be able to sign up for the program. I know poverty in America because I lived it for a decade despite help from family. Government programs can help for a time. But know this, I spent my high school years working on grades and homework and at a job. I went to four years of college, working on grades and a job. I went to four years of medical school working on grades and leaning on the government for help, which I am now paying back. Then, I worked four years as a resident on call, on 12- or 36-hour shifts with just enough sleep to go back and start again. Now I work. And I work. Work and making good life decisions result in prosperity. No one — I repeat, no one — becomes prosperous on government programs. Student loans, food stamps, Medicaid, and unemployment benefits are there to help temporarily, but for heaven's sake, government aid is not a right and living your life like you are entitled to eternal government care is not right.


Anyone who wants to can go to school for 12 more years after high school and work, incur student loan debt, drive a 14-year-old car for 12 years, and study (while passing on TV, movies, parties, conversation, family life, sleep, and eating to

study some more). They can then make a living that buys a nice home, clothes, insurance for family, and, hey, a new car. Anyone who can work can do this. And I'm all for government help for those who, through no fault of their own (and not their poor choices), can't work.

This woman, however, would reach into my pocket and take my hard-earned money while tapping impatiently on my watch to give her more of my immediate time and attention when others need it more, still claiming I am a cold-blooded heartless rich guy intent on robbing her of all the government assistance that is her due while simultaneously stiffing the hospital for what she considers an unconscionable medical bill. I am not cold-blooded or heartless, just tired and beat from the work I do and proud and gratified that I can do it. The same is possible for anyone here in the land of opportunity.

Are we so far gone as a society, in the name of popular progressivism, that we now don't view work as something to be valued, specifically when the work requirement is removed from the welfare bill? Are we so far gone as a nation that we vilify someone for their hard-earned wealth and elect a national leader who believes in taking that away to pay for those who would act as drains and not aquifers to the national pool of prosperity? Have we developed a national mindset that makes it normal to expect others to take care of us?

I think we develop a self-absorption that is callous in the face of anyone else's need when we rely on the government to handle our every need. No respect. No decency, no restraint, no responsibility, and no apology for it.

Frankly, our government cannot fix this, they cannot mandate a solution to this, and they cannot legislate against this. Nor should they. The solution to selfishness and entitlement can only be fixed with a mother and father (who know how to model character) teaching a child that work is hard and rewarding, that life is not fair and never will be, and that the freedoms you enjoy in this life are because someone else paid the price. Get up and get fixing. 

Sincerely,  
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