



## **NOTHING IS GOOD IF BETTER IS POSSIBLE**

(Welsh proverb... Author unknown)

Report of California Nurses Association conference 10-12  
September 2007 by Angela Gorman

The above title is that which I gave my presentation at the California Nurses Association Conference last week in Sacramento. The title brought an immediate round of applause; they knew exactly what I meant. It wasn't a reference to their efforts to improve the situation for every citizen of the US; it was about the appalling system under which they are expected to deliver care. I shared the stage with a nurse from Australia and another from Canada.

How do you react to your hand being taken by a hero of a man who has been let down by the US healthcare system as my hand was, on the evening of Sept 11th? I shall never forget the look in his eyes.

The following account has been taken verbatim from a press item of Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> Sept 2007.. the day after our presentation.

\*John Graham, a hulking man with sad eyes, wearing a shirt only half buttoned, looked the part of a man who on Tuesday, had not slept well.

"It was not an easy night," he said.

There have been many such nights over the past six years, but Monday had been particularly bad, knowing dawn would deliver the anniversary of the date that painted the sadness in his eyes.

He had been a volunteer emergency medical technician six years earlier, working at a job site in Manhattan near the World Trade Centre.

"I was looking up at the second plane that hit the tower, just like I'm looking at you," he said staring intently at the interviewer.

His immediate response was to start looking for the injured and to help.

We (the reporter) spoke in the lobby of the Sacramento Convention Centre where Graham was an honoured guest of more than 1000 nurses. Later in the day, he would speak at a rally on the Capitol lawn.

His message: America's healthcare system is such a mess it has failed even those whose illnesses spring from patriotic heroism.

Oct 10<sup>th</sup> 2001, Graham was diagnosed with asthma and "five or six other" respiratory ailments. Since, he says, "It's gotten progressively worse."

He quit his job as a safety officer for the Carpenters Union in 2004 after having battled pneumonia three times in a year.

His health insurance ran out a year later. These days, he's got an oxygen tank and other paraphernalia at home. "When I have an asthma attack, I give myself my own emergency respiratory treatment."

Graham's story may, by now sound familiar. He was featured in Michael Moore's film "SICKO" and has become a crusader for universal healthcare.

"There are 18,000 people dying every year in the US because they don't have healthcare," he says. "That's six 9/11s a year."

Listening to Graham's story is an uncomfortable experience. The California Nurses Association knows that. It is why they brought him to California at a time when legislators and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger are negotiating health insurance reform which the nurses believe falls short of an authentic solution.

END OF QUOTE....

On the evening of Sept 11<sup>th</sup> the C.N.A. had organised a dinner to which the people who had been featured in SICKO were invited. I sat with John as he told me how he entered the WTC, bodies were falling around him and almost onto him. The dust and smoke damage to his lungs has now meant that he is supposed to take high dose steroids.. when he can afford them and these steroids are causing thinning of his bones and he now has osteoporosis. As he held my hand he told me that he receives \$400 per week (at today's exchange rate that's £200) for him and his 2 sons to live on. He also told me that he has Irish family and asked whether I thought he would be cared for if he moved to Ireland. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't give him an answer. As much as I am proud of being British and Welsh, I felt guilty for having so much.

THE ABOVE SETS THE SCENE FOR WHAT I SAW AND HEARD FOR THE WHOLE PERIOD OF MY VISIT FROM 9-12<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER... THERE IS MORE TO COME.

On Sunday afternoon, I watched a film about the CNA and how it had evolved over the past 100+yrs to become one of the foremost active and critical sections of the population in relation to what I saw as an imploding healthcare system. Rose Ann DeMoro, their Executive Director has been described as one of the 10 most influential women in the USA; the list includes Hilary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice.

The Assoc found out on Sunday that there was going to be a debate in the Parliament Building so at 08.30 on Monday 10<sup>th</sup>, we were all issued with red tee-shirts with the CNA logo on and all marched to the Capital Building, holding banners aloft and holding up the traffic! We were allowed in and we filled the ground floor corridors. I stood outside Arnold's office and had my photo taken!!

We returned to the Conference Centre where we heard 2hrs of stark warnings on how "Digitizing Care" could impact on RN Skills, Judgement & Patients, by Don DeMoro, Director of the Institute for Health & Socio-Economic Policy...

Following lunch we went to our workshops.. my choice "Labour Management Partnerships" turned out to be not exactly as I had thought! Given that this concept is new to the UK and appears to be a positive move, the presentation offered some very thought provoking arguments against partnership working although it all centred around profits for the Insurance Companies. It also gave the impression of the union stance as being "poacher turned gamekeeper." It was quite unnerving.. and feasible! Whilst I am not complacent about what is happening here, we are not YET in that league!

In the evening we were entertained by Ian Ruskin, an English RSC actor who did a one man play about Harry Bridges, "a labour leader and social campaigner with a profound and far-reaching impact on the fabric of American life during the 20<sup>th</sup> century." He fought to win basic rights and human dignity for all workers. The play was terrific. He fought under the banner of "An injury to one is an injury to all."

Tuesday morning 11<sup>th</sup> September brought a celebration of how "RNs in Motion" had achieved so much in their respective workplaces across the USA. This was followed by our panel. Each of us had approximately 20mins to describe the healthcare system in our respective countries and further describe how it benefits patients and nursing staff. The second part was asking why the USA should move to our system. Remember that despite the problems here, we are in a far better position than the US. However unsatisfactory things may appear here, multiply that 100times and it still won't equate to what is happening to our brothers and sisters over there, plus of course their patients. We had a Q & A session on our presentation in the afternoon, at the start of one of the workshops and people did not hold back! There are still some who are sceptical and who do not want their taxes to be used for people who pay nothing and who will abuse the system and told us so! I replied that a country is judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable citizens and from what I could see, the USA was not doing well on that score! Nevertheless 70% of US citizens wish to move to a single payer system. The workshop enlightened those present on how the system would work and more significantly, how it would SAVE the country \$350billion a year. As I stated in my presentation, "In a country where the dollar rules, it just does not make economic sense to continue with the present system!" The few sceptics continued to question us and then I said, "For me the bottom line is that I cannot conceive of living in a country where, when I wake up each day, I would have to think... Is this going to be the day when I get sick and possibly lose my

home?" I added that at nearly 60yrs of age, I have never been a commodity for which an invoice has had to be raised!

On Tuesday evening we attended an awards dinner, where people who had made outstanding contributions to the C.N.A. were recognised and also those citizens who had starred in SICKO. You won't need me to tell you their stories, you will see them on the film which I believe you can download or at least see mentioned on the website [www.michaelmoore.com](http://www.michaelmoore.com) ... names like Donna & Larry Smith, Cynthia Campbell RN & Allen Campbell, Julie Pierce, Dawnelle Keys & John Graham. Most of these amazing people attended the whole conference and are now a part of the family that is the C.N.A. There were two nurses who went into the area devastated by Hurricane Katrina. They had been told not to go in, but went anyway and set up clinics etc. The conditions were appalling, but they stayed anyway.

Wednesday morning 12<sup>th</sup> September brought us an incredible speaker called Barbara Ehrenreich, who has just published a book called Nickle & Dimed which describes how she went undercover working in Wal-Mart as a low paid worker. This woman told us how it is easy to get health insurance, (via the Net) for a 3yr old dog with an ear infection, but that she could not get it for her 3yr old grand-daughter with the same problem. I purchased a signed copy of her book and started reading it at the airport.

I had to leave at about 11.15am, before the end of the Conference in order to catch a plane from Sacramento to San Francisco and then the flight home. My departure was for me, emotional and genuine as I hugged many of my new found brothers and sisters.

I don't know exactly what we can do on a practical basis for our colleagues in their appalling system. As I told them, I have such admiration for them as they seem to have to fight for absolutely everything, including their right to join a Trade Union.

I think that the main points to lift from the report are as follows:-

18,000 people die every year because they cannot access healthcare.

Many more are under-insured and do not discover this until they need it.

Health Insurance Companies employ 2million people in the US and the overheads are 30-40% of the total costs. I think most NHS Trusts are aiming for 5% management costs.

Many people struggle to pay for prescriptions and I heard that some cut their tablets in half, whilst others only take them every other day to make them last longer.

There are homeless elderly, turned out of hospitals despite not having a roof of any kind to be under.

47 million Americans do not have health insurance including 1million children in California.

Workers, including healthcare staff get 2 weeks holiday a year.. many work it!

Workers cannot retire until 65 years of age.

In the Chicago area, 4 mental health units have been closed. Most patients are wandering the streets; many are war veterans with PTSD. (I met and was told this by some of the delegates at the airport and we continued our discussion as we waited for our flights.) One man had severe frostbite and had lost half of his nose.

Bankruptcies are on the increase and 50% are caused by mounting healthcare costs. People put them on their credit cards and then can't pay their credit card bills.

The list goes on and on... and any suggestions regarding what we can do would be much appreciated.

As I told everyone, despite the fact that I love going to the USA (I had a grandmother who was from Pennsylvania) and that I am proud to be British and more particularly Welsh, my overwhelming feeling as the days went by, was that I was RELIEVED to be British and Welsh. They knew what I meant!

ANGELA GORMAN

17<sup>TH</sup> SEPT 2007.