

The cure is worse than the disease

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WASHINGTON — Joseph A. Califano, secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), has undertaken to make himself the No. 1 doctor in charge of curing the ills that afflict the nation's system of medical care. He is royally botching things up.

This is scarcely surprising. Califano perfectly embodies most of the doctrinaire notions of the liberal mind at work. A product of Harvard Law, he has been in and out of government since he was 24; he is witty, brilliant, and rich; he is now in a position to administer some of the liberal programs he drafted as a top assistant to Lyndon Johnson.

Within the Carter Administration, he stands out like a blue jay in a swarm of sparrows.

Among the most cherished of all liberal notions is the notion that "Washington knows best." Another prized notion is the notion that money is the cure for all evils. These two notions have caused most of the particular ills that Dr. Califano proposes to remedy.

At the moment, our doctor-in-charge-of-everything is operating on the high cost of hospital care. It has not occurred to Dr. Califano that the government's policies are overwhelmingly to blame for the condition that disturbs him.

If one plots on a chart the rising



By James Kilpatrick

costs of hospital treatment over the past 15 years, and plots on another chart the soaring federal expenditures on Medicare and Medicaid, it will be observed that the lines precisely track.

Hospitals have overexpanded in this period for one reason above all others: Federal money was there to pay the bill. Equipment has been purchased that might not have been purchased otherwise. Hospitals have had no incentive for reducing costs and every incentive for letting costs get out of hand.

Now comes Dr. Califano, masked and gloved, waving his carving knife. He will fix things up. Among his draconian measures are a dozen guidelines published in the Federal Register. They manifest the notion that Washington knows best.

Under these guidelines, the Washington bureaucracy proposes to impose a new web of regulations upon all

communities and all hospitals in the land. The rules deal with the number of deliveries in obstetrical units, with pediatric services, with open heart operations, with radiation therapy and with renal diseases. In these areas of hospital care, minimal standards of bed occupancy would be established.

Hospitals that fail to meet the occupancy rates would risk the loss of their federal payments.

In large metropolitan areas, the approach may make a good deal of sense. In rural areas, it makes none. The Califano guidelines contain some vague gestures toward small towns, but the gestures are meaningless. Dr. Califano would improve the public's access to hospital care by making access more difficult; he would enhance the quality of medical care by reducing it.

Our doctor-in-charge-of-everything has other interesting remedies.

With one hand, he keeps sawing away at high hospital costs; with the other hand he is pumping up pressures to make them higher still. Largely because of HEW's threats and demands, more than 1,600 hospitals — including such eminent institutions as Walter Reed — face a loss of accreditation for failure to meet stiff safety standards.

It's hard to knock safety, but some of the requirements will demand millions of dollars in remodeling to



Secretary Califano

achieve a negligible gain in patient care.

On down the road Dr. Califano sees the greatest cure of all: National Health Insurance!

In London last November, he told newsmen that Britain's system of socialized medicine "is likely to form the basis for the U.S. national health system due to be set up by the Carter administration." He went into raptures over Britain's program and said it was a "tragedy" the U.S. had not adopted the same plan long ago.

If this amiable quack has his way, virtually all medical care in the entire country will fall under federal domination. We will then treat Califano's disease with Califano's cure. If you think the disease is bad, believe me, the cure will be worse.