
Bit by bit, we in the United States have been moving toward a system of health care in which the government assumes all responsibility for paying the bill — a single payer system. We took a major step in that direction with the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 and narrowly avoided another major step with the rejection of the Clinton health plan in the early 1990s. At the end of World War II, government accounted for about 20 percent of all spending on health. This percentage has been rising ever since, slowly until 1965, then more rapidly after the advent of Medicare and Medicaid. Currently, government accounts for nearly half of all spending on health and almost surely for more than half if we include indirect spending through tax subsidies.

A single-payer system has great political appeal. It promises to provide quality health care to all, regardless of income, religion, race, or initial state of health. But does it live up to that promise? In this important book, John Goodman and his coauthors set out to find the answer. They examine health care in Canada, Britain, and New Zealand, three countries that have adopted national health insurance, and compare it with health care in the United States.

Their findings will surprise many and deserves wide attention.