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Beyond National Health Insurance - Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie to the Dade County Senior Citizens Council

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REMARKS OF SEN. EDMUND S. MUSKIE
DADE COUNTY SENIOR CITIZENS COUNCIL
MIAMI, FLORIDA
FEBRUARY 14, 1972

Arch

...(tape turned on at this point) very old, so he stopped, introduced himself and said to the old gentleman, "I suppose you've lived in this town all of your life." The old fellow said, "Not yet." And then he said to the old-timer, "Well, just how old are you?" "Well," he said, "This happens to be my one hundredth birthday." "Well," the out-of-stater said, "I don't suppose you expect to live to see another hundred?" The old fellow said, "Well, now don't be too sure. As a matter of fact, I feel a lot stronger today than I did at the beginning of the first hundred."

But in Maine we don't always talk about feeling old, either. There's a question of how you approach the problems of life. And there's a story up in Hancock County, Maine, of the old gentleman who, upon reaching the age of one hundred, was interviewed by the local paper, The Elsworth American. The reporter said to him, "Jed, you've lived a long time, and I suppose that you've seen many, many changes in your lifetime." Jed said, "I sure have, and I've been against every one of them."

Well, that's not the case with this organization, or the National Council of Senior Citizens, of which you are a part. You've seen a lot of changes and you've supported many of them." In fact, you have been the driving force behind some of the most important of them. Those of us in the Congress who have worked with your leaders know the impact that you can have.

Some of those leaders have recently been taken from us. We lost Aime Forand, the author of the Forand Bill, which was the first national proposal for medicare. Every man who serves in a legislative body wishes there might be one bill that bears his name, for which he will always be remembered. Aime Forand was granted that wish and he earned it richly, even though he doesn't enjoy that reputation now in the enactment of medicare.

And just a few weeks ago we lost John Idleman, Former President of the National Council, one of the most respected and most effective legislative representatives in Washington. John was the kind of a person who worked behind the scenes, never made much of a fuss. But when he passed away, just a few days ago, they made a fuss over John. They held a memorial service for him in the Caucus Room of the United States Senate and it was fitting, because that is where he gave his best service as the advocate of America's Senior Citizens.

Men like Aime Forand and John Eidleman were, and men like your own President, Max Serchuck, are eloquent spokesmen for America's Senior Citizens. If your nation is to begin to remember its Senior Citizens; if it is beginning to give them some of the rights they deserve; beginning to take notice of the conditions under which they live, the contributions they could make in our society, it is not because the majority, who are still young, have magically awakened to the truth, but because organizations such as yours have acted forcefully and dramatically to wake them up, to force them to look at this country and at themselves. That, I take it, is what is meant by "Senior Power" on those buttons which you wear here tonight.

I am sure you know that in every other modern industrial society, the rights of the elderly are not even at issue. The western European countries today have social security and health insurance systems far beyond what we are even proposing in America. In China and Japan, the elderly are venerated as the primary source of wisdom and of social stability. Only in America do we place so much emphasis upon glorifying youth and beauty, too often to the detriment of those who have become old in the service of our country.

Why is this so? Only when we can answer that question to our satisfaction, will we be able to move ahead. The election of a new president, alone, in 1972, cannot change the status of Senior Citizens in our society. It will require the kind of national commitment a President can inspire, but which a people must make. For it is something that lies, not alone in the policies of government, but in the nation's daily life.

Why is it? It is not our religious heritage. Both the Jewish and Christian religions respect age for what it can contribute. It is not the culture from which our parents came, for there, too, age was treated with respect. The problem of Senior Citizens today is a symptom of the nation's neglect for those who do not have power and do not have wealth. It is a sign we have forgotten that while we have many interests, we are one society, whether it is the problems of black people or poor people or old people. Only as we provide for the least of us can we improve this country for the rest of us.

You know, we have another Maine story--and we usually have one that fits almost any occasion--of the out-of-stater who crossed the New Hampshire border into Maine. He arrived at an intersection with two roads pointing north, each of which bore a sign to Portland. He was puzzled and stopped and asked a native, "Does it make any difference which road I take to get to Portland?" The native said, "Not to me, it don't."

But the fact is, of course, that even in Maine we've learned

that what happens to each of us does make a difference to the rest of us. And we must apply that to the problems of those who've been left behind. That is the commitment I think a President should make, and that is the principle behind the proposal I wish to make to you tonight on the subject of medical care.

Max has told you something of what I am for with respect to our Senior Citizens: The need to provide them with decent incomes; the need to provide them with decent health care within their means. Rather than recite a litany of those commitments, I'd like to speak to you about this special one.

More than two hundred thousand Senior Citizens live here in Dade County, and forty-five thousand live in Miami Beach. How many of you have to worry whether you can find a doctor when you feel a sudden pain? How many of you have had to wait when the need for care was immediate? How many of you have had to travel miles on a bus to find medical attention? How many of you have watched your income drained away by the sky-rocketing price of drugs or glasses or hearing aids? How many of you have to depend on your children to pay your medical fees so you can stay healthy or alive?

Medicare and Medicaid have helped most of you, but not enough. And after ten years we've learned that we need more than those programs. Because the disaster we call "medical services" in this country makes millions of Americans forgotten Americans. It deprives each of them and all of us.

I have traveled across this country. I have met children who have never met a doctor or a dentist. I have met men and women without health care which should be the right of every human being, not the privilege of a wealthy few. I have seen, as you have, over-crowded hospital corridors, and over-worked doctors and nurses. They stand as bleak testimony to the failure of a medical care system that is, too often, a system of medical neglect.

And there is no excuse for this. Certainly not when other countries are winning the fight for a higher standard of health. In Israel, for example, medical care is available to every citizen, despite its constant peril and huge defense obligations. When I visited Israel last year, I saw how a nation of pioneers received their brethren from lands of persecution, reclaimed a sacred soil and guarded it from its enemies. But with all of their problems, they did not forget their older citizens, their sick, their wounded, the scarred and maimed of history's holocaust.

We know what we must do for Israel, but we must also ask ourselves what we can learn from Israel. If the people of that country, small and beleaguered as it is, can guarantee good health service for every citizen, then surely we can take the dollar sign out of medical care for Americans. (APPLAUSE)

Surely the nation which gave the world the Bill of Rights can now afford a Medical Bill of Rights for all Americans. (Applause)

The first medical right of all Americans is care within their means. To me that means a program of nation health insurance. (Applause) That is our best hope for the future and it will be among my first priorities as President. (Applause)

The second right, and one which is all too often forgotten in the rhetoric of those who state the first one, is medical care within the reach of every citizen. (Applause) People must be able to reach treatment centers. They must be able to reach doctors, nurses and dentists, without checking to see if they have the exact change for a bus that may not come for another hour. (Applause)

So along with national health insurance, we must have a system that gets health care to the people. The Federal Government can begin tomorrow to shift the delivery of health care from a system dependent on the individual doctor, to a system built around local health maintenance organizations. (Applause) Such organizations would allow us to allocate medical resources with maximum efficiency and to maximum effect. They would employ para-professionals to relieve doctors and nurses from routine and time-consuming tasks. They would gather together diverse skills from internists to cardiologists; and patients would deal with the entire organization, not just a single physician.

By locating clinics with comprehensive medical services in places where all of us live, a health security system can reverse the present bias, and it is a bias, in favor of high-cost hospital treatment and against preventive medical care. (Applause) That bias is both expensive and insensitive to the real needs of people. It has filled hospitals with patients who should not be there and who would be better off elsewhere. (Applause) In short, what I am proposing is a new way to provide medical treatment, and national health insurance to pay the bills.

This new approach to health would include the following, among others; incentives to increase the number of doctors, nurses and medical personnel; it would include incentives to set up health maintenance organizations in areas of critical need, areas where there are high concentrations of people over 65 or people with low and moderate incomes; areas like some areas of Miami Beach, Hollywood and St. Petersburg. For you and most Americans that would mean, as it should, regular check-ups, constant care and longer lives. (Applause)

And may I say that even now, while we are debating a national health insurance program, and while we are laboring to create it, a health security system would make a real difference. And without such a system, without comprehensive medical clinics at the local level, national health insurance would give millions of Americans the money to pay a doctor's bill, but no doctor to pay. (Applause)

So may I say that it is time for a medical bill of rights for all Americans. It is time for a health security system and national health insurance. That is what I've worked for in the Senate; that is what I will insist upon if I am elected President. (Applause)

And may I say that I support this kind of an objective for Senior Citizens and for other citizens, because I believe that our society from its beginning has been people-oriented. We've not always followed the directions that that orientation requires, and indeed, in my judgment, demands. I say it is people-oriented because from the time that I first began to understand why my father came to this country, I have believed that our country, at its best, has represented hope for our own people and for others around the world who look for an example of what a decent, free society can do for even the least of its members.

And in recent years we've become so preoccupied with the material things that flow rather freely and easily to the affluent, that we've tended to neglect, and indeed, not see consequences for those who have to fight and struggle for the essentials of life itself. And that is not America, in my judgment, and it has never been America at its best.

We live in a time of great doubt and uncertainty among our people as to our validity as a society, as to our objectives, as to our values. Well, I have a very simple definition of what our society is all about. Our society is about human life and how we can make it truly free and satisfying and meaningful to those who have it. And if our country doesn't represent that, it represents nothing that is worthwhile, in my judgment. (Applause)

And to represent that requires that those of us who are in the flow of our ability to change things, to correct error, to deal with injustice and inequity, it requires that we who have that power use it in behalf of those who do not have the power to serve their own elemental needs. (Applause)

Let me say to you that if I judge the temper of our people, it requires that we measure up to that test. And you should require that we measure up to that test. We elect a President every four years; and for the last three, and more, there has been doubt as to whether those elections mean anything in the day-to-day lives of people like yourselves and others who are outside, who are outside the sphere of the powerful.

And so, in November of 1972, the people have an opportunity, and they must take it, they must insist upon it, that the next government headed by the next President, shall address itself to the day-to-day human problems of people who cannot deal alone with the problems of their own lives. And if we don't do that in 1972, to the extent that we fail, we diminish our prospects for doing so at some other time in the future. This must be the year of people power in America, if our country is really to mean what it has always meant at its best

for our people. (Applause)

And I ask you to measure not only the other candidates, but to measure me by that standard. Because if I am elected President of the United States, I want to do so on these terms. I want to do so on the clear understanding that if I become President, I will reach out to every group of Americans whoever they are, wherever they are, whatever their origins, whatever their circumstances, to make them feel welcome in this country in which they live. Welcome in the sense of making them a part of our life, putting opportunity within their reach, enabling them to develop their own full potential, make it possible for them to look forward to an old age of dignity and security. (Applause)

I recognize my falibilities as a human being, and it's your job to force me to rise above those short-comings so that I can serve you better. And if I do, you have the commitment I've made to you tonight. Thank you very much and God bless you all. (Enthusiastic Applause)
