

## Visions Of The Future Of Health Care: Scenes From A Trip To Costco

by Steven Siegel

Maybe it was the woozy feeling from too many free samples of two-bite brownies or the giddy delight of seeing the food court's quarter-pound hot dog with a 20-ounce soft drink (plus free refills!) for a measly \$1.50, but a recent trip to Costco gave me visions of the future of health care in the United States.

After hearing from numerous friends and family members about the bargains to be had, I finally signed up when a Costco representative visited my office building and enticed me with a membership offer I could not refuse. With the paperwork making it official, I could barely contain the rush of excitement I felt for my inaugural visit into the world of mass wholesale shopping. Yet, I had not suspected that the visit would provide a revelation for the future of what has been described by President Obama as “the most inefficient health care system imaginable.”

Here then are scenes from a trip to Costco:

### Scene 1—The Parking Lot

Driving into the parking lot, I encountered a seemingly endless array of vehicles. Gas guzzlers, hybrids, luxury imports, beaters on their last legs, massive SUVs, compacts and subcompacts all filled the parking spaces. Even a few bikes and a skateboard or two hugged the curb.

It's clear everyone likes bargains. And at Costco, anyone can join for an annual fee.

FUTURE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM VISION NUMBER 1:

*Universal coverage with no barriers to access.*

### Scene 2—The Official Membership Card and Photo

Once inside the store, the first order of business was to have my picture taken for my laminated membership card. Through their efficient data system, all I needed to obtain the card was my driver's license for identification verification. My card would allow me entry into any Costco worldwide. One piece of information conspicuously absent from my membership application was the name of my employer.

Although the Costco representative offering memberships was set up in my office building, my employer had nothing else to do with the application.

FUTURE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM VISION NUMBER 2:

*To preserve competitiveness in the global market, the role played and cost borne by the employer for providing health care is lessened.*

*The employer represents a conduit for health care coverage, rather than a primary stakeholder.*

*Health care coverage is portable nationwide and a uniform data system is employed to ensure maximum efficiency.*

### Scene 3—Flat Screen TV Land

With my membership card in hand, I anxiously made my way to the formal entrance. Once there, my eyes were mesmerized by the dazzling images of row after row of flat screen TVs. High-end brands juxtaposed next to off-brand names I never heard of. For the most part, I could not discern any difference in picture quality, and I must admit I didn't really care if there was a difference. To me, TV is TV. But, the difference in price between a 42-inch brand name versus an off-brand was astounding. Knowing the price differential, I can safely say I'm definitely an off-brand kind of consumer when it comes to TVs.

Right now, when I see a doctor, I have no idea what kind of consumer I am. When I make an office visit, I don't know if I'm getting brand name or off-brand treatment. I imagine for some services I'd want the off-brand and others I'd want the brand name. But, I simply don't know because I don't have the information, nor can I get it easily.

Why should I be better informed about my TV purchases than my health purchases?

FUTURE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM VISION NUMBER 3:

*Extensive cost and quality information is made readily accessible to consumers to make them smarter users of health care, resulting in overall cost savings.*

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**Scene 4—Free Samples**

Leaving TV land, I made my way to the food section. When they say you can buy in bulk, they really mean it. With the endless choices, deciding on exactly what to buy is the real dilemma. But, there is a fun way to help make up your mind—free samples! I never thought I'd like carrot juice, but after seeing a blender demonstration and several tastings, I was hooked. As the saying goes, “tastes good and good for you.”

FUTURE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM VISION NUMBER 4:

*Free or low cost prevention services as an incentive to better health and wellness, effectively reducing overall health care utilization.*

**Final Scene—The Check Out**

Many have argued that Americans are not ready for the visions I have described. It is posited that the United States is a special case in the industrialized world with a completely different culture. For those inclined to that mindset, I'd like to suggest that an efficient, universal health care system is as American as baseball, apple pie and a \$1.50 hot dog plus free refills—Costco-style!

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