COMMODITIZATION IN HEALTH CARE:
Can we afford the effects of cheap health services?

Gokce Ozdemir

I am not a physician; I am not even a medical student. I am just an undergraduate student who’s burning with passion to enter the healthcare field here. I am not even from Canada; I cannot assume that I know specifically how the Canadian healthcare system works. I do, however, have some knowledge about general trends across the globe, threatening the future of medicine and healthcare. One such trend is that of commoditization. When I first heard this word, I didn’t know what it meant, so here comes an explanation from Wikipedia: “commoditization is defined as the process by which goods that have economic value and are distinguishable in terms of attributes (uniqueness or brand) end up becoming simple commodities in the eyes of the market or consumers.”

It is a long way of explaining how the buyer will tend to choose the cheapest option when provided with similar looking options. From this article’s perspective, commoditization is the trend of patients choosing the cheapest of healthcare options. In order to satisfy this demand, there is a need to reduce the costs of the services provided. How can this goal be accomplished? The answer lies in limiting the time per patient, and in standardizing the services. It is like trying to have one size of T-shirt for everyone, which takes less time because no extra effort is needed for different patients. Commoditization feeds on this kind of standardization. It results in the loss of the patient-physician connection, which is the most treasured part of medicine. It’s like a sick carousel; as doctors are made to see more
and more patients per hour, the quality of care inevitably diminishes, because their chance to really consider each patient’s uniqueness is eliminated.

No matter how damaging it is to public health, commoditization is a profitable asset for institutions. To compensate for the reduction in the prices of health services, they invest more in machines than in physicians. For this reason, radiology services probably suffer the most. Hospitals advertise their expensive radiology services, which overshadow their physicians. Naturally, it appears to the public as if it is the machines that do the job. If a hospital is making such a big fuss about its fancy machines, it has to be a big deal, right? Thus people start to believe more in the medical machinery than the skills and experience of the physician. The service prices continuously go down, to keep up with the competition, because when the patients find the same result in two places, they go to the cheaper place. Consequently, healthcare becomes a commodity.

Some might argue that commoditization is necessary, especially in healthcare, and they could have reasonable arguments. They might even compare the situation to what you would choose to do if your car broke down. If you find two services that diagnose your car in the same way and offer the same repair plan, but ask for different amounts of money, I assume you would go with the cheaper service, and I would too. Think about this for a second, though. Cars versus humans. Can one really put the two in the same category? I have come across a fun short story in social media, and it goes like this: a physician’s car breaks down, and during the repair, the car mechanic asks the doctor why the doctor makes more money than him, considering they are both doing the same thing: fixing things to make them work again. The doctor replies, “Try fixing the car while the machine is still running.”

Coming from a family of physicians, I saw before my very own eyes how the rise of commoditization in medicine results in physicians shifting away from their previous perspectives towards their fields. Doctors have started to feel obligated to differentiate their services in terms of quality, to compete with one another’s prices. Although this might sound like it would motivate them to work harder and be better, to stand out from the crowd, it does quite the opposite. Those who devote their lives to being better realize that they are just being put in the same category as many others, and even machines. How well the machine performs imaging, for example, begins to matter, not so much how specialized the physician is who is diagnosing the particular image. Doctors start to lose their motivation and interest in expanding in their field, which, day by day, is leading to less and less than ideal diagnoses and treatment plans. As is the case with everybody, doctors also need motivation, and to feel appreciated. How
ambitious can you remain, whether you are a physician or something else, if the work you put in is overlooked? How much further can you go? For how much longer will your fuel last? Maybe a few will get stronger from this; their anger will fuel their ambition and they will do everything it takes to be the best. Will you be strong enough to do so? Where and when will it end? How much higher can you climb the stairs if you are running out of energy and there’s no one around to help you refuel, but those who just put more obstacles in the way? We profit from commoditization, but can we afford the disastrous effects of cheap health services?

I will end on a personal note: I grew up seeing my mother, a breast radiologist, go through so many hardships while sacrificing the most important thing, family, for her job and her patients. She worked, worked, and worked. She went to courts fighting for patients’ rights; she spent her days endlessly studying to be the best so that she could save women whose lives were about to be torn apart by diminishing healthcare and related misdiagnoses and inadequate treatments.

Commoditization is what made my mother realize there was something really wrong with the system, and that it had to be fixed. Commoditization is what made her feel less than her worth, coming home in tears that she tried to hide from her children. She didn’t have time to watch my volleyball games, or pick me up from school, or see every single step in my brother’s and my developments, but she has nothing to be sorry for. Mom, I am proud to be your daughter. You are the one who taught me how to stand strong against the odds. I am not angry at you for missing my games, I am not angry for never seeing you home until the late hours of the night, or for my not eating mommy-made meals as often as most other kids did. Everything that you went through and the ways you dealt with them made me a better person, a better woman. Thank you for being an inspiration.