

# A Hint of Socialized Medicine

## It Can Happen Here

by Jolene Babyak  
Pacific News Service

People preparing themselves for the promised onslaught of Russian flu might consider two alternatives: visit the local health department for a vaccination-- or move to Stickney, Ill.

For if you lived in this sprawling Chicago suburb, you'd simply go to one of three clinics with proof of residency (a water bill will do) and you'd be entitled to free health treatment.

Have a baby here and a public health nurse will come to your home with diet and health care instructions. Move into town with a senior citizen and he or she will be whisked off to a clinic where podiatry exams, hypertension, diabetes or hearing and eye tests are given regularly, all free.

Sound unbelievable? Not for the 44,500 people in Stickney Township, who have been getting "free" primary health care for over 30 years.

Considering that most Chicago residents, for example, pay between \$12 and \$20 per office visit, Stickney's public health plan is unusual indeed.

While many communities provide public health clinics for the indigent or for VD treatment or immunizations, few public health clinics provide physicians for a broad range of medical needs-- and even fewer are wholly subsidized by local taxes.

Stickney prides itself on its cradle-to-grave health care. Everything from pre-natal, pediatrics, immunizations to mental health needs (at reduced rates) and care for the special needs of senior citizens is provided. Stickney also provides extensive social services such as students to aid families if a parent becomes incapacitated.

But by far the most applauded service is dentistry. Stickney has five public health dentists, including two who circulate year-round among the area's 12

elementary schools in a mobile unit. The unit is attached to a school's utility lines for a month while dentists check students, and, if needed, fill, clean, or extract teeth with parental permission. All free, up to the 8th grade.

Limited x-ray and lab services are also available at about half the going rate (chest x-rays in Chicago cost about \$15, whereas Stickney charges \$7). Medication also costs about half.

"It's all coming together now," said Kenneth C. Rehnquist, health director of Stickney Township, who said that planning and communication were the toehold to efficient service. "You start small, prove the need for what you've got, show you're successful, then take it step by step. We didn't start out with all the programs we have now," he said.

Although the health plan has evolved over the last 30 years, it has its origins in the Depression, when former Township Supervisor Herbert Maid sought to help local truck farmers get off relief rolls. He convinced businesses in nearby Clearing Industrial Park to support a clinic to make them employable.

Today the clinics and township business (most of which is involved with health care) cost about \$1.1 million to operate, of which local industries pay about 68% in property taxes.

Private individuals, accounting for most of the remaining percentage, pay about \$22 per household a year for the service.

Nor is the program subsidized by local doctors. Salaries of the three township physicians (one staffed in each clinic), the nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists and dentists are commensurate with the area agencies, and Stickney has at least 12 private physicians and dentists operating side-by-side with the health service.

"We're not trying to replace the private practitioner," said

Rehnquist. "We try to intervene with a program of preventative medicine, and most private practitioners are geared to the healing aspects of disease once it occurs."

A healthy attitude exists, in fact, between the local private practitioners and the health service, which refer patients back and forth. A private doctor in the area explained that the health service's quarterly newsletter, sent to every household, made citizens more health conscious, which in turn benefited the private practitioners. "Brings more business in," agreed a private dentist in the area.

And, adds a housewife, who, like many residents, uses both the township clinics and private doctors: "Let's face it, what doctor isn't busy?"

While national health expenditures in 1976 amounted to \$139 billion, or \$638 per person, millions couldn't even afford minimal care. What makes Stickney able to accomplish primary health care so cheaply?

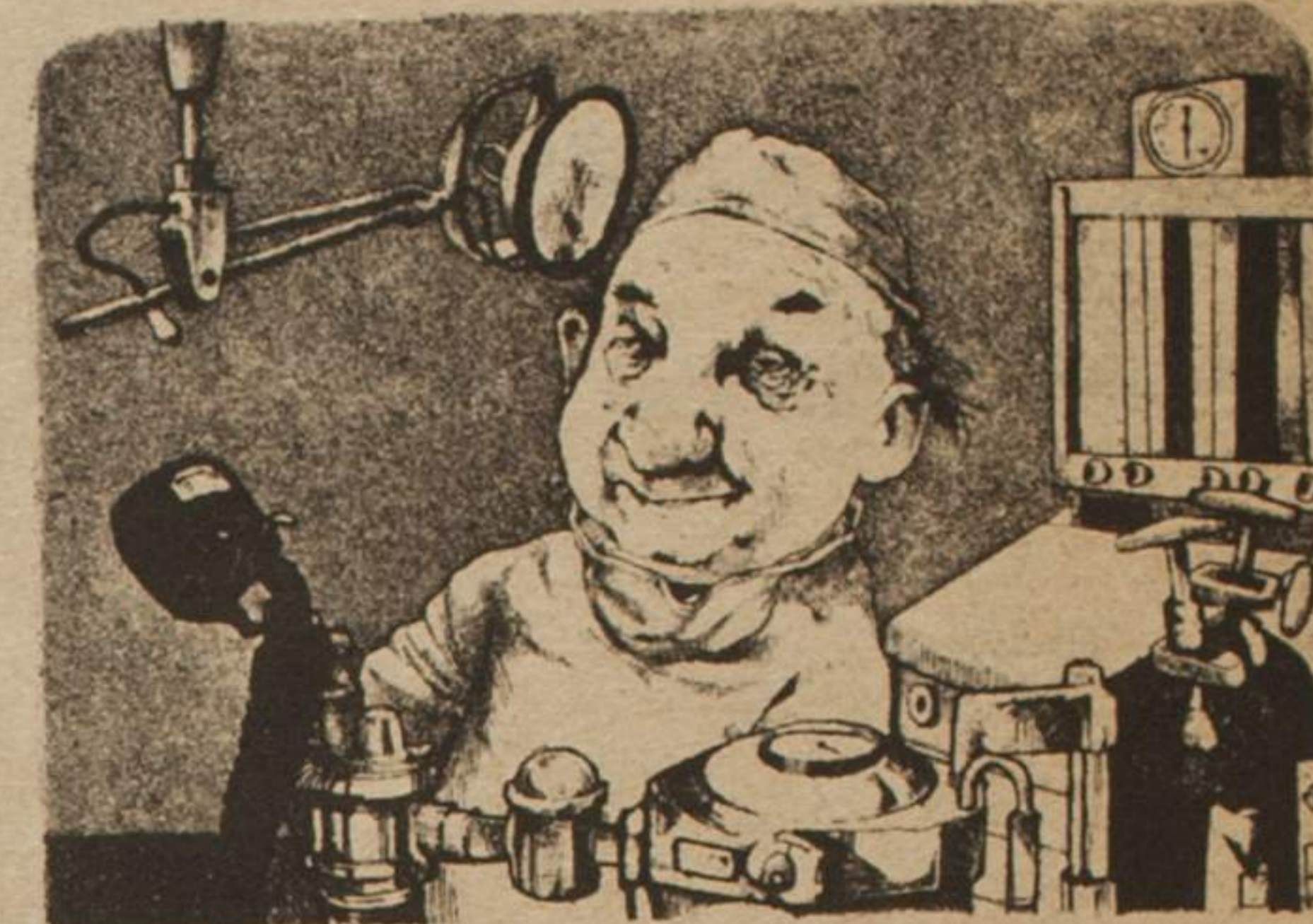
Health directors realize that soaring costs have relied on several factors. Duplication of services, especially little-used expensive equipment, is rampant among hospitals. Inefficiency, boggled paperwork and no real incentive toward finding solutions are added ingredients.

Stickney has none of these problems. It receives minimal government funding in the form of revenue sharing and state grants, and provides no hospitalization, so paperwork is kept to a minimum. And since it is working on a fixed budget, there is a high incentive for efficiency.

"My most important job," said Rehnquist, "is coordinating services so that we don't duplicate. This is the key to cheaper delivery."

"It sounds like they're getting a lot of services for a limited amount of dollars," said Dr. Bill

Etching by Charles Bragg



Roy, M.D., J.D., a former Kansas congressman and current member of Secretary Califano's (HEW) Advisory Committee on National Health Insurance. "One of the problems we face with national health insurance is that mental, dental, preventative, rehabilitative services and things of that nature will probably not be covered...so communities could broaden their public health services and benefit their population greatly."

Louis S. Viverito, present township supervisor--who said that poorer communities or towns without industries would probably have difficulty establishing extensive services modeled after Stickney's--claimed that he wouldn't have been re-elected without opposition if his constituents weren't happy with the health plan.

Last year the three clinics had over 30,000 patient visits, and the dentists seated nearly 5,000 patients.

If this is socialized medicine (and the term has little meaning to many health directors today) then it is alive and well in Stickney, Ill.

"Anybody with the same dream and the same drive," said one private doctor in Stickney, "could do the same thing."

