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## HEALTH CARE

Analysis

### Health Care Shortfalls Revealed in New Film

## DYING FOR HEALTH CARE

An independent filmmaker follows the harrowing last years of a breast cancer victim and her odyssey through the health care system that failed her.



June 05, 2010

Image credit: Iva Hruzikova, The Fiscal Times

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By BLAIRE BRIODY, The Fiscal Times

When 43-year-old Sheila Wessenberg was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001, the last thing she wanted to think about was how to pay for the care she needed. But after her husband lost his contract job along with the health insurance that came with it, her health, her family and the life she had worked so hard to build was thrown into turmoil. She first applied to Medicaid, but her application was denied; she had too many assets, she was told. The family was able to stay on [COBRA for six months](#), but when the premiums shot up to \$832 a month (in 2002 dollars), the Wessenbergs' savings dwindled quickly.

Faced with the craziest choice imaginable -- keeping her home and her family together, or continuing chemotherapy -- Wessenberg chose the former. It's a decision that probably ended her life. Four years later, Sheila Wessenberg was dead. The day after she died, she was approved for Medicaid.

In 2003, filmmaker Julie Winokur began following Wessenberg on her journey. Moved by her story, she created the 12-minute documentary, *Denied*, about her struggle to find medical care. The film premiered at the [Media That Matters Film Festival](#) on June 2. It's a harrowing tale, one that reminds us of the failures and weaknesses of the health care system in America. Wessenberg's family hopes that her death wasn't for nothing. They hope her story lives on to help bring quality, affordable, and readily-available health care to everyone, no matter how sick or how poor.

With the [health care bill signed](#) on March 23rd, her family may get their wish, but director Winokur asserts that the fight is far from over. "The legislation certainly is no panacea," she says. "There are some major concerns with the legislation as to whether or not people are actually going to have primary care doctors to go to."

Cost, of course, remains a major concern. The American Cancer Society calculated the costs of early-stage breast cancer treatments over a year and a half to be \$111,000. Wessenberg's doctors estimated that they spent over \$250,000 in the attempt to save her life (including estimated costs of their donated labor and treatments), and that number rises every year. Many people are [unsure whether there will be enough federal money](#) to pay for the new bill. Some states are aggressively fighting the health care bill, and at least 14 have filed suit against the federal government. Starting in 2014, insurance agencies will no longer be allowed to deny coverage to someone with a [pre-existing condition](#), but will they be able to cope with a \$250,000 tab for the number of people who may need care?

"We're far from having this resolved," says Winokur. "The legislation is not going to provide health care for all. [The film] is a rallying cry: It is not acceptable to allow tens of thousands of people to die every year because they do not have access to health care."

Four and a half years after Sheila Wessenberg's death, her husband, Bob, is still faced with thousands of dollars in medical debt. "Even in a society that's very strong and rich, people think that this won't happen. The problem is that it can happen. It did happen to me and to Sheila. And it cost us dearly."

Watch the film [here](#), and share your thoughts below.

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