



UNAFFORDABLY UNHEALTHY

By Anthony J. Piccione

A SMITH SCRIPT

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UNAFFORDABLY UNHEALTHY

12 American Stories About the Cost of Staying Alive



**A play by
Anthony J. Piccione**

Playwright's Note

Health care is an issue that affects every citizen, of all ages and backgrounds. At some point or another in our lives, we all need to take a visit to a doctor's office. Yet by February 2020, when this play first premiered, America remained the only industrialized nation on Earth that doesn't guarantee such a visit as a human right, and despite all the political theatre that had been created in New York City during the Trump administration, I'd found it strange that such an important issue, which we can all find some emotional connection to, had been greatly overlooked in the NYC indie theatre world.

It was just one week after the world premiere of this play closed at The Tank in NYC, when theaters left and right were shutting down - if only temporarily - in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To me, as politicians stumbled over how to contain it and hospitals were desperate to prevent an overflow of patients, this only reaffirmed my belief that not only was major change needed to America's healthcare system, but that perhaps even more radical improvements were needed worldwide.

The stories told by the twelve characters in this play are all based on real-life stories I discovered while doing early research, prior to writing it. I hope that by seeing these stories, people will not only be exposed to the horrific cost - both the financial cost, and the human cost - of America's healthcare system in 2020, but they will be inspired to speak out and take action themselves on making the global political and economic system better for all of humanity, so that we are all less likely to suffer broadly during future times of potential crisis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anthony J. Riccio". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'A'.

Unaffordably Unhealthy

By

Anthony J. Piccione

This play can be presented with as little or as much staging, lighting, sound, and sets as the director wants. What matters is that the storytelling remains intact, and is delivered in an emotionally convincing manner.

The dialogue in italics can be spoken by one or more different actors, including the ones speaking each monologue, or someone else.

The ensemble monologues can be spoken by all actors simultaneously, or split up to be told by different actors at a time.

The numbered monologues can be split up and told in whichever order the director chooses. However, one distinct actor must speak each numbered monologue for themselves.

LIGHTS UP

ALL

When you're sick, you're sick.
If you need help, you need help.
It shouldn't matter how much money
you have, nor should it matter
what day you walked in the doctor's room.
You shouldn't have to beg or reason or

take out whatever's left in your bank account, just so
you can live a healthy and comfortable life,
or even live at all. It is their responsibility
to help, despite what some might claim.
It's not your fault that you're sick, despite what
the insurance companies want you to think.
If you're sick, it's not a privilege to get help.
It's your right...
...and we all deserve that right.

1

When they recorded my daughter
being dumped out of the hospital,
she was wearing just a skimpy hospital gown and socks.
It was so appalling, the video went viral,
and it wasn't until then that the hospital
issued any sort of apology.

*"We have received the many complaints filed
against our hospital, and wish to apologize to Ms.
Hall and her mother for the way she was treated,
after her coverage was denied."*

I still can't believe they treated her like that.
As it is, she's already been struggling so much

(MORE)

1 (cont'd)

with all her past anxiety attacks, hence why she went to get treatment, in the first place. How could the doctors possibly think that throwing her out into the cold would do anything other than make her condition any worse? Do they just not care?

"Ahhh! Please, please help me! Please! No! Please!"

The day she went in for in-patient therapy, I was feeling optimistic. She realized that she was suffering from depression, and that there was more that could be done to get help, and understand why she was feeling the way she was feeling about her life for so long now.

"It's not that...I want to die. It's just that I...I'm so tired of...I just...I need help! Please!"

From the very beginning, she complained that the doctors weren't really listening to what she had to say, and that they could barely remember in each meeting what she said in the last. Judging by the brief time I spent there, it was obvious. But thanks to her insurance she gets from work, it only lasted for a week.

"We're sorry, but we're afraid our hospital does not accept your insurance."

She was kicked out in the most inhuman and unsympathetic way that you could imagine, as the world saw on video, with their own eyes. It was all because she couldn't afford to get the treatment that she needed.

"Please! Please, I...I need help...I'm trying to get help, and I...I don't know where else to go-"

I wish there was more I could do to help my daughter afford the treatment she needs, but we can barely even afford our mortgage, and I'm worried that if her condition gets any worse, we may have to make a choice between helping our daughter or keeping our home.

"I promise, sweetie. We are working on it. I promise, we'll make sure you get the help that you need."

The way in which people with mental illnesses are treated is just awful, and this whole situation

(MORE)

1 (cont'd)

is more proof of it. I sincerely hope more can be done to better help people in situations like my daughter. For starters, it'd be nice if it was easy for them to access and afford the help they need.

ALL

When we see someone who looks fine on the outside, it's easy to forget they may well be completely broken on the inside. As a society, the more we neglect the emotional and psychological well-being of our fellow Americans, and the more we turn them away, the more likely we are to bring down our overall well-being, and leave more of our neighbors to feel empty and isolated, without knowing how it feels to be loved or cared for by others.

2

I thought breast cancer would be as bad as it gets. I mean, cancer was as bad of a diagnosis you could imagine getting. The chemotherapy that the doctors said I needed was completely miserable. But I had no idea just how miserable it would be...

"Well, doctor? Is the chemo working?"

"M'am, we have some bad news. Have you had any heart problems during the past few years?"

"Why?"

"We're afraid that during the treatments, your heart did not respond well..."

The chemo damaged my heart beyond repair, causing Doxorubicin Cardiomyopathy, leaving it unable to pump enough blood.

I can't work anymore, and just two years ago, I was forced to go on disability.

The doctors gave me tons of medications and treatments, including a continuous Milrinone IV, once it reached the point where I needed it.

Eventually, I had to have open-heart surgery, and have an LVAD implanted in me temporarily, until I could get a new heart.

These have all helped me stay alive, to this point, but only one thing can save my life in the long-term.

"We strongly recommend seeking a transplant as soon as possible. We're afraid the heart you have now isn't going to last long."

I just turned 61,
but I feel like I still have at least 20 years left
of life left in me.
But my heart is the only part of my body
that isn't agreeing with me.
As it is, the out-of-pocket expenses
for all the treatments that I've been getting,
is thousands of dollars.
Even for someone on Medicare,
it's way too much.
I mean, the average cost of having
an actual heart transplant is something like
\$1.4 million, I think.

"If you can't afford the cost, as you're suggesting, we strongly recommend applying to this committee, as they might be able to provide funding that will cover your transplant, if they approve your application."

At first, I applied to a hospital committee
at the Spectrum Health Richard DeVos Heart and Lung
Transplant Center,
in the hopes that they would approve
the funding that would allow me to get
the transplant that I needed, in order to live.
As I would quickly learn,
not too long after applying to the committee...
my hopes were misplaced.

"The decision made by the committee is that you are not a candidate at this time for a heart transplant due to needing a more secure financial plan for immunosuppressive medication coverage."

Essentially,
what they said was that they were rejecting me
because I couldn't afford the follow-up care.
They were straight-forward in their letter,
in that my ability to pay for the care needed to save
my life
was a deciding factor in whether or not
Spectrum Health would be willing to spare me,
and help me through the process that
I needed to go through to live.
Instead of helping me themselves,
they recommended I look elsewhere for financial help.

"The Committee is recommending a fundraising effort of \$10,000."

So I went on GoFundMe,
after hearing that over 600 million was raised

(MORE)

2 (cont'd)

in covering health care costs
 on their website just last year,
 I told my story to the world.
 We raised tens of thousands of dollars,
 thanks to many generous strangers who heard our story.
 It even reached Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,
 and she was nice enough to spread the word on Twitter.
 But as grateful as I am that we are
 raising the money that we need,
 it's pathetic that in order to make this happen,
 we should have to turn outside of private insurance,
 and toward a website like GoFundMe.
 Even their CEO says it's pathetic.

*"The system is terrible. Politicians are failing
 us. Health care companies are failing us."*
 And he's right.
 I wish that I had
 a more secure financial plan
 that would have allowed me to get the transplant I need
 now.
 But those weren't the cards I was dealt in life,
 and as a result,
 I'm reliant on the donations and good deeds of others
 to make sure that I can get off a list on-time
 to get a new heart,
 and a new lease on life.
 The more I wait, the more
 I can feel my time running out.

ALL

There are many doctors
 who do what they do
 because they want to help others
 and to save lives.
 But can the same be said for
 the people who administer or finance them?
 Can the same be said for the people
 charged with ensuring that a doctor-patient
 relationship
 exists, in the first place?
 The more people get sick,
 and the more people die,
 the easier it gets to question exactly that.

3

This past winter,
 I had the flu.
 At first, I thought it'd go away quick,
 but it just kept getting worse and worse.
 More and more of my friends at work
 began to notice, to the point where

(MORE)

3 (cont'd)

- because they knew how tight things were for my budget - they even offered to chip in for me to go see a doctor.

"You really don't want us to chip in to cover the cost?"

"That's very nice, but please don't."

"Are you sure? It sounds like it's getting worse-"

"I really do appreciate it, but I'd feel terrible asking for help."

In hindsight,
I probably should have.
I had a bad cough.
My chest felt tight.
I had a fever and chills.
Eventually, one night,
I had no other choice...
...I had to go into the ER.

"M'am? M'am, hang in there. It'll be ok.

Everything'll be ok."

By the time the doctors had gotten back to me, they told me that my flu had turned into pneumonia. I'm 58 years old, and I haven't always been able to get checked up as much as I'd like, so that was pretty bad.

"But I'll get better, right, doctor?"

"You will, but you'll have to take good care of yourself, and take these medications that we recommend."

The doctor told me I had to take an inhaler, plus antibiotics and steroids, and refill them each month. Even at my local Wal-Mart, there's always a high cost to get it refilled. Then there's the bill for the X-ray that I had to get done, which I haven't even been able to pay yet, because of all those other costs.

"That'll be \$250 for the inhaler and prescriptions each month, and \$45 for the x-ray, m'am."

I can't afford to go out to eat, or even take my grandkids to the movies, let alone afford insurance for all these prescriptions I need. I'm struggling, but I still make too much to qualify for Medicaid. I tried looking into an Obamacare plan, but the costs of premiums were still just too far out of my budget.

"That'll be somewhere between \$250 to \$300, m'am, depending on which plan you choose."
 Those costs have been affecting the rest of my life, too. Because of my prescriptions, I'm behind on the gas bills. The winter temperature here in West Virginia is usually freezing. Eventually, I had no choice but to accept help from a friend just to keep the heat, hot water, and cooking gas on. It's just been so hard to catch up.

"Please don't feel bad. We're just trying to help."

"I know. It's just...the bills keep adding up, while I keep getting more sick, and...I don't know how much longer I can keep asking for help, without feeling that."

To this day, I can't afford to go see a doctor. The closer I get to 60, the more scared I get about what will happen the next time I get sick. It wasn't that long ago that my dad died from cancer. With that history in the family, I get real worried about how much longer I'll be there for my grandkids...

ALL

There are still some who like to pretend that Americans look out for one another, and take care of the sick and the poor, who need compassion the most. There are still some good people out there. Otherwise, there might also be more dead people. But when it all comes down to it, we are NOT a compassionate society. What kind of compassionate society determines who lives and who dies based on the size of their pocket book?

4

I can't see a thing out of my left eye. It was a life-changing experience when I first went through the process that left my retina broke, and unable to see. The worst part about it all, as far as I'm concerned, is that it was all perfectly avoidable. It started with the car accident I was in, sure, but the lasting damage was because of a broken system that does nothing to help people in my situation.

"Sir, what's the last thing you remember?"

"I...I-"

"Can you hear us, sir?"

"I can't see!"

"Yes, your eye-"

"Out of my left-eye, yeah! I can't see a thing!"

Last thing I knew?

Well, I remember it was night time,

and I was driving.

It was raining hard,

storming,

and out of nowhere

there was this car headed right toward me.

I tried swerving away,

but the road was too wet.

He hit me head on...

reckless driving.

The next thing I knew,

I was still alive, but in the hospital...

...with my eye-sight intact only in my right-eye,

as a result of a broken retina.

"If we act now, there is a surgery that might be able to save your eyesight."

The doctors had told me

that if we were to act quickly,

then they could potentially repair the damage,

and thus save my sight in my left-eye.

The problem was

I didn't have health insurance.

My job didn't offer private insurance,

and there wasn't a way for me to

afford it on my own.

So my only real option of paying for the surgery

was Medicaid.

"We're sorry, but we regret to inform you that you don't qualify for Medicaid."

"What? How is this possible?"

The problem was that

the Medicaid expansion under Obamacare,

meant to cover people like me,

was rejected by the state of Louisiana.

At the time,

our governor was aiming to become

the Republican candidate for President in 2016,

and he was more than happy

to give the middle finger to the workers

that had voted him into power in Louisiana,

if it meant possibly getting a better job in politics.

"And today I am officially announcing my candidacy for President of the United States! Together, we will restore America to its traditional values of limited government, and repeal and replace Obamacare starting on Day One of my administration."

So I had just sat around,
in the desperate hopes that at some point,
things would change in the state of Louisiana,
or I could, by some divine miracle,
find a way to afford private insurance.
More and more time passed
where I couldn't afford to see a doctor,
until eventually...
...the window of opportunity passed,
and it was no longer possible to reattach my retina.

"We're sorry, sir. But we're afraid it's too late. At this point, it is no longer possible for us to be able to save the eyesight in your left eye.

Half of my eye-sight.

Gone.

It was gone because of an health care system
that obviously cares more about
taking your money than getting you better.
It was gone so my state's governor could position
himself
for a failed bid for president.
It was gone because there just wasn't enough
in my bank account
to save my retina.

"We're sorry for any inconvenience this may cause you. We hope we answered all of your questions today in a completely satisfactory manner, and that you have a nice-

"Go fuck yourself."

I'll never forget
how it happened,
and I'll never forgive
the people who are responsible.
At this point, I couldn't care less
if Governor Jindal were to come right up to me,
get on his knees, and beg for forgiveness
over the role he played in hurting me
and so many other in my state.
He should have known what he was doing.
Not that I'm expecting it, of course.
I'm not expecting much of anything to change,
regardless of how many more people like me get hurt,
because of the decisions our leaders make.

ALL

It's no secret
 that most politicians are corrupt.
 But it's often easy to overlook the stories
 of the real human impact their selfish ambitions
 can have on so many people,
 until, of course, it directly affects you.
 Until more people wake up,
 and realize the connection between their leaders
 and their declining standard of living,
 there will be no incentive for them to change...
 ...and even that may be too optimistic.

5

I was there
 to take my 8-year old daughter to an appointment
 with our family pediatrician.
 We walked out
 before it could begin.
 We had no choice.
 Our family got dropped by our insurance
 just a month before the appointment,
 and there was no discount on cash payments.
 It just would have been too much for us
 if we paid out of pocket.

"That'll be \$150, m'am."

My daughter
 was just there for a check-up.
 But our 4-year old son
 was born with a rare heart condition and genetic
 disorder.
 And we're a family of six,
 including me and my husband,
 so we really do need to have
 some kind of health insurance for all of us,
 if we're going to be able to keep going.
 It's just that our most recent coverage
 was just too much...

*"Today, we are announcing that our premiums will
 be increasing by \$300 to \$1,400 a month, beginning
 next year."*

I work at a construction company.
 My husband is a nurse practitioner.
 Before taxes,
 our annual household is around
 \$140,000.
 But with our premiums going up this year,
 we decided it was too much
 for a plan with a \$7,500 deductible.

"BREAKING NEWS: Another day, yet another health insurance company announcing that they are increasing their annual premiums at the start of the coming year."

Luckily for our son,
he's still eligible for the Medicaid program here in Virginia.
For the rest of our family, though,
we've had to join a Christian healthcare cost-sharing ministry.
We were reluctant, at first,
but when we looked more into the details,
it seemed appealing to someone in our family's situation.

"By joining for \$350 a month, you can help save on your overall health expenses."

We've been doing all we can
to save on our healthcare expenses
whenever and wherever we can,
with the help from the ministry.
Our daughter will get her checkup
at the family practice where I've been going.
It offers a discount to patients
in our cost-sharing ministry.
When I had a psoriasis outbreak recently,
I went to several pharmacies to check prices,
and a coupon cut the price of Clobex
well below its usual \$600.

"That'll be \$125, m'am."

Our family's been very lucky,
in some ways.
We've been able to save more money
than a lot of others, it seems like.
But it's still taking out quite a bit
of our monthly expenses,
and with our son's condition,
we live in fear of what could happen
if he loses his Medicaid,
and gets sick again.
And what if something happens to one of our other kids?
I dread what could happen
in a worst-case scenario where we can't afford
to help our own kids.

"We regret to inform you that we are unable to provide treatment, unless you are able to find a way to provide payment upfront."

It's what been keeping
my husband and I up all night.
This ministry has helped save us,
in many ways.

(MORE)

5 (cont'd)