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U.S. health care is so complicated

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PART of business sense and common sense is efficiency. In our country's health care system, it sometimes seems to be in short supply.

On vacation last month in Virgin Gorda, a small outpost in the British Virgin Islands, I needed clumsiness-induced medical attention.

In a modest clinic in a cinder block building, a doctor numbed my hand, patched me up with a couple of stitches and gave me a tetanus shot. It cost \$57. I never filled out a form or showed any kind of identification. I was out in a little over half an hour. The amoxicillin capsules (20 of them) the next day cost \$4.70.

It reminded us of the last time one of our traveling party needed medical attention abroad. About 15 years ago, we were tourists in Rome when our friend Bob started having chest pains. He got himself to a hospital, where they checked him out, administered an EKG, gave him a shot of something or other and sent him on his way with the admonition, "You be careful."

There was no charge.

As I plow through a year's worth of medical paperwork for tax purposes--all the "This Is Not a Bill" statements, actual bills and bills for services for which we've already paid--I join untold millions in wondering how everything got so complicated and expensive.

According to Virginia Health Information, a nonprofit that tracks state health data, a trip to the emergency room for a minor problem costs an average of \$569. Urgent-care centers can fix a lot of problems for a lot less, of course, but it's hard to keep it simple when you need medical attention.

If you think the government will make a bureaucratic, inefficient hash of health care, save all the paperwork and mailings from a year when fate sends you deep into the bowels of the health care machine as it now exists. Think about all the time and money that was spent.

Waste? Redundancy? We're already there.

SCALING 13K

Last week, the Dow Jones industrial average managed to scratch and claw its way to the first over-13,000 closing since May of 2008, nearly four years ago.



In some ways, this arrival at 13K is more comforting than the last one, which came in the midst of a thrill ride that was too exhilarating for most of us to leap from. The Dow had taken barely four months to go from 12,000 to 13,000, and it took less than three more months to reach 14,000. It peaked at 14,164.53 on Oct. 9.

And then it fell.

At its nadir in March of 2009, the Dow was barely half of what it is now.

Three-digit rises and falls are a sign of a nervous and unstable market. What's happened recently is more along the lines of two steps forward, a step and a half back.

It's all relative, of course. While an average cross-section of Dow stocks invested in May of 2008 would have you at break-even now, a similar investment in March of 2009 would have nearly doubled (98.2 percent).

Old news but true: The best time to invest is when your portfolio is lying in smoldering ruins, not when it's soaring like Icarus toward the false and fatal sun of easy riches.

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