Sicko (2007) is a pseudo-documentary film that is rife with opinion and ethical dilemmas that cross over between business, government, and filter all down through to each and everyone once of us as Americans, and a citizens of a larger global community. It is the compelling drilled –down view of America’s failing healthcare system. Though there is no true ‘plot’ to this film, there is a clear direction. The films director-producer, Michael Moore, narrates and hosts this journey into the ills that face our healthcare system in America, discusses the origins of why we are where we are today, and what some of our closes allies have in place that could be templates for an updated system for America. Through the personal stories of many individual Americans, both insured and uninsured, and visits to countries from Canada to Cuba, Moore paints a slightly biased, yet candid picture of the plain and simple truth around healthcare in America, that being the fact that business is more valuable than humanity, and the ethics of healthcare in America…well, they have been long forgotten for the bottom line.

Portrayal of the Insurance Industry in America

The health insurance industry in America is shown in an incredibly negative light throughout this entire film, albeit not unfairly at most times, as justification and factual evidence is consistently provided to back upon the claims that are presented. The primary focuses of the negative attacks are on the practices and business processes that are practiced as the “norm” or “expectation” in normal operations.

Moore takes his time carefully attacking these behaviors of the healthcare insurance industry as a whole, not wasting the efforts to exclude anyone in particular that may be a
smaller offender, as all can be included as participants. The primary focus is the lengths that the large health insurance companies go to in order to not cover even those that are considered fully insured. For example, Moore interviews Tarsha Harris, a young woman with very good coverage through Blue Cross. Within her story, she was actually taken care of and had a necessary surgery covered through her insurance. Within a short period of time, Blue Cross informed Ms. Harris that not only are they now not covering the bills from the surgery, but that she has been dropped from her coverage in whole, the reasoning being that she did not disclose a previous severe medical issue when she had applied for her coverage. The severe medical issue that was so deliberately concealed in order to gain the insurance fraudulently was… a yeast infection, only slightly less common than the seasonal flu. The insurer was able to change the rules in their favor to get out of paying the claim, leaving Ms. Harris powerless and without health insurance.

The example of Ms. Harris is one of the more benign examples that are laid out for the viewer, all of them hitting home with me personally, and I imagine anyone that would view this film. The lengths that are taken by the insurance corporations to deny care as often as possible for any reason, even those that will hold up to scrutiny, is infuriating, and frightening all at the same time.

**Ethical Dilemmas: Dr Linda Pino**

One of the most striking stories of the entire film was that of Dr. Linda Pino. Dr. Pino was during the later 1980’s and early 1990’s a Medical Reviewer for the health insurance organization Humana. During this time her job was to look for mechanisms, using her medical expertise, to deny procedures and claims. The ethical conflict here is
blinding for doctor, as Dr. Pino had taken an oath that to provide care to all whom require it. As a doctor, working in the health insurance industry, she was constantly caught in the balance of working towards the drives of the business, profit, and the oath and ethics that she was to uphold as a matter of her profession. For Dr. Pino, the resolution for her was clear after a period of time, and it was dramatic. Dr. Pino took a drastic step, on that could have cost her the medical license that she worked her entire life to attain. In 1996, she sat before a congressional sub-committee and provided the following statement:

“…My name is Linda Pino, and I am here today to make a public confession. In spring of 1987, as a physician, I denied a man the operation that would have saved his life, and thus caused his death. No person and no group had held me accountable for this because in fact what I did was save a company $500,000 for this. Furthermore, this particular act secured my reputation as a good Medical director, and it ensured my father advancement in the healthcare field. I went from making a few hundred dollars a week as a medical reviewer, to a escalating six figure income as a physician executive. In all my work, I had one primary duty, and that was to use my medical expertise for the financial benefit of the organization for which I worked, and I was told repeatedly that I was not denying care, I was simply denying payment. I know how managed care maims and kill patients, and I am here to tell you about the dirty work of managed care, and I am haunted by the thousand of pieces of paper on which I have written that deadly word…denied.” Sicko (2007)

Through this she was portrayed as a pariah, and a renegade within the industry. Even for all of her soul searching, she had still waited almost a decade to finally bring this point to the forefront. Moreover, it did not bring any resolution to the overall problem, as this startling revelation to the government’s attention over 13 years ago, and the practices are still happening today. In my opinion, there should have been direct action, and a publicizing of this event throughout the country, to rally the citizenry of the country to make their collective voices heard, as that is the only way that the needed change will ever come about, by a mandate of the people, one that must be unwavering through to its
**Ethical Dilemmas: Congressman Billy Tauzin**

In early 2002, there was a new initiative working its way through the hall of the Senate. This bill was supposed to be the greatest advancement of the healthcare reform effort in recent memory, the updated prescription drug plan to assist with Medicare, a.k.a. Medicare Part D. Congressman Billy Tauzin spearheaded this legislation. Throughout the debate, structure, re-debate, and restructure of the legislation, Congressman Tauzin was both the most vocal advocate of this legislation, he was also the intermediary between the government and the drug companies around the legislation, a piece of law that held a price tag of over $800 billion dollars for the taxpayers. The ethics come into question at this point, but only under the surface. As all of us in America are now aware, the legislation passed, and actually drove up the cost of drug coverage for many seniors, and left over 2/3 of seniors still paying over $2000 annually out of pocket for their medications. Shortly after the passing of the act, Congressman Tauzin went to work for the largest lobbying organization in America, as the CEO of PhRMA, with an annual salary of over $2 million dollars annually, portraying him as having a “golden ticket” to push the legislation through and be rewarded by the industry for doing so. This was the primary group that he personally dealt with during the crafting of the legislation, and there are glaring conflicts of interest in the final outcome. The congressman should have not been able to take such a position, as it was no doubt influenced by the partnership created to pass the drug bill; legislation that was going to greatly benefit the customers of the PhRMA lobbying organization. One can only assume what was actually happening behind the scenes, but the perceptions of unethical behaviors are undeniable. This should
have had a much different outcome, with the congressman having absolutely no ability to be rewarded for pushing through an act that was so beneficial for the drug industry, as conflicts of interest were obvious and glaring. Additionally, the lobbying organizations should not be able to play such a large role in these government activities, as the objectives are then focused on the bottom line, as opposed to what it really needed for the betterment of the country as a whole. With all of the discussions and reform efforts that are in process yet today, there had obviously been no true resolution to this type of conflict and questionable behaviors of both business and government, but there is still hope. Additionally, did I mention that there were 14 other senior staff that were incremental to the passing of the legislation for Medicare Part D that immediately left their positions and went to work in high ranking positions within the drug industry?

**Ethical Dilemmas: Humanity vs. Profit**

The final ethical dilemma to take away from this film is exactly that…the entire film. The basic undertone behind *Sicko* was twofold; first was the overtone of the health insurance industry and the US government being the “big bad wolves”, spending their money and efforts to keep us away from the idea of “socialized” healthcare, and secondly, possibly more importantly, was the undertone of how can there ever be an ethical balance when providing humanity for profit. This may seem a little over philosophical for an ethics issue discussion paper; however, this was the real message throughout this film. Every example shown throughout this film was in one manner or another tied to this thought. From the CEOs of the largest healthcare organizations literally making billions of dollars in compensation, to the dropping off of patients whom
do not have insurance via taxi in front of local missions when they can no longer pay their bill, to the very doctors themselves having to question their own ethics daily, as they are forced to turn away individuals that require care simply because they cannot afford the “right” coverage. Throughout history we have seen examples of humanity for profit turning quickly to corruption and the loss of actually working towards the betterment of the many and/or humanity. Bottom line…would the centrally managed healthcare option add enough benefit to be worth the destruction of an industry that generates billions of dollars in profits and tax revenues? That is the question that we are facing today around reform of healthcare. The answer to all of this…well, that is a question to which I do not have an answer. I think that we need to look to our global allies, and even enemies, that have solutions that seem to be working, and build around the best practices from all of them. That is more of a suggestion than a solution, but even with that, it will never happen in the country until one thing occurs, and that is the voice of the entire country saying that reform is not optional, and we are ready to give up massive profits and power for the overall betterment of every citizen in this country.

**Ethical Dilemmas: Others throughout the film**

There were other ethical issues throughout *Sicko*, although they all tied back to the basic ethical issues that I have pointed out through the duration of this paper. I would say that every individual whom watches this film will find any number of conflicts of interests, doctors not upholding their Hippocratic oath, down the corruption of the healthcare industry, their lobby, and interactions with those whom set the regulations for their industry. Naturally, everyone will see the message of the ethical conflict of
humanity vs. profit, and how your views are upon that topic may increase or decrease your opinion of how many ethical issues are actually presented throughout the film, and I think that is its greatest strength.

**My Growth and Learning from this Exercise**

For me, this exercise was many things, but above all, it was eye opening. I had very specific reasons for choosing to view *Sicko* for this project. I work for one of the largest healthcare insurance organizations in the country. As I have been learning about the industry I have often questioned if all of the rumors as just that, rumors of what healthcare insurance companies really practice. After engaging in this paper, I have been taking closer notice of the practices that are going on daily around me during my working day, and at times, I am conflicted about the practices that I am seeing. Eventually, this is going to lead me to a hard decision about my future within this organization.

I also found myself being somewhat hypercritical of the information that was being presented to me in the movie, as I am of everything that I see since beginning this class. I find myself doing much more research on even the simplest topics, and now, digging into the realities of my own personal health coverage is going to be the first item on my “to do” list.
Works Cited