THE LEFT ATRIUM

Film review

SiCKO strikes a chord

SiCKO

Written, produced and directed
by Michael Moore
Alliance Atlantis; 2007
116 min

There's a scene in Michael Moore's latest documentary, *SiCKO*, in which the populist filmmaker takes 3 boatloads of ill Americans — many of whom are rescue workers suffering from respiratory illnesses and post-traumatic stress since volunteering at Ground Zero and have been denied sufficient medical care — to the US military base at Guantanamo Bay. Wielding a bull-horn, Moore demands that these "9/11 heroes" receive the same medical treatment as "the evildoers" of Al-Qaeda being held prisoner there. Getting no response but the sound of alarms, Moore then takes them to "the enemy" — a nearby Cuban hospital — for treatment.

The scene is classic Moore. The US filmmaker best known for his previous controversial films, *Bowling for*

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Filmmaker Michael Moore chats up a doctor with the British National Health Service.

been abysmally treated by their health care insurance companies.

Moore's message — that the US health care system is broken — is nothing new. But there's no denying the impact of seeing, on the big screen, close-ups of a gashed knee that one poor

on the health insurance industry and Health Maintenance Organizations, which appear more interested in reducing corporate losses than patient care. As one former medical reviewer, testifying before the US Congress, guiltily recalled: "I was told I was not denying care. I was denying payment."

For many, Moore's films are like poutine; they either like the big, cheesy dish that he serves up or they're disgusted. Like any good spin doctor, Moore is adept at cherry-picking truths that propel his storyline and conveniently ignoring those that don't. In *SiCKO*, Moore lauds the socialized medicare offered in Canada, England and, above all, France. To illustrate that universal health care has not impoverished French citizens, Moore visits a bourgeois family who proudly show off their luxe home and collection of beach sand from travels around the world;

A documentary is "the creative interpretation of actuality."

Columbine and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, knows how to pull a good stunt for the cameras in order to hammer his point home. With *SiCKO*, he delivers his most potent and provocative film yet. And whether you like his left-wing politics or not, this film is bound to provoke outrage, laughter and even tears with its stories of Americans who have

fellow is forced to sew up himself, confessions from insurance company doctors who admit to receiving bonuses for denying claims for medical treatment and security camera footage of disoriented patients being dumped by cabs at skid row shelters after being denied care at hospitals.

SiCKO primarily focuses the blame

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"How much for the baby?" asks filmmaker Michael Moore, eliciting laughs from this British couple.

but there's nary a mention of the French tax rates that support their generous health care system.

One scene in *SiCKO* that has been subject to much criticism on this side of the border, depicts Moore's visit to an emergency department in London, Ont. To counter tales of long wait times in the Canadian system, Moore asks a handful of people how long they've been waiting for care. Their answers range from 20 to 45 minutes at the most. Some Canadian viewers may be as incredulous as Americans at the brevity of these wait times. In a newspaper interview, Moore countered that "the film is not supposed to be a balanced portrayal of the Canadian system." When asked whether one inaccurate depiction casts doubt on his other arguments, Moore replied, "My job was to show Americans one basic truth about your system ... that if you need health care, you'll get it. I know that people in Canada have problems with their system, but your system believes that everyone gets a share of the pie — sometimes you get the first piece, sometimes you have to wait a little for your slice, but you still get your slice."¹

Some Canadians who are unhappy with how their "slice" is currently delivered often look to the US private health care system as the answer. Viewing

SiCKO may change their minds about wanting a system in which treatment is determined by how it affects a private (for-profit) health care provider's bottom line.

In a summer movie season peppered with mindless fun such as *Shrek 3* and the latest *Die Hard* sequel, it's *SiCKO* that will have the most people talking when they leave the cinemas. Moore adeptly taps into a growing population who would rather get their dose of "news" from infotainment shows, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*, than watch serious current affairs shows, such as the CBC's *The Fifth Estate* or *60 Minutes* on CBS.

Some Moore critics complain that his films are not objective. But it's prudent to keep in mind that, unlike news reports seen on television that strive for journalistic balance, documentary filmmaking is subjective. John Grierson, the founder of the National Film Board of Canada, is credited with coining the term "documentary," which he defined as "the creative interpretation of actuality."² The documentary filmmaker makes a conscious decision in telling a story at each step of the way, in deciding whom and what to shoot, how to set up a shot and how to edit it together. The final result is an aesthetic view of how the director sees the world through the camera lens, and

the ultimate goal is to encourage audiences to question their realities.

On both sides of the US–Canada border, *SiCKO* may do more to galvanize consumers into thinking and caring about what they want in health care delivery than any politician's speech or news story could.

SiCKO blends all of Moore's usual ingredients: inane sound bites from US President George Bush, humorous use of graphics (a Star Wars–like listing of 37 pages of "pre-existing conditions" that will disqualify us from receiving private health care insurance elicited big laughs) and, of course, Moore himself, looming large with his baseball-capped, man-at-the-mall demeanour. And he serves it up his way — with a heavy dose of cheese and gravy slathered on top of his Freedom fries.

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REFERENCES

1. Vaughan RM. "I cried for the whole year making this film." *The Globe and Mail* 2007 June 29;Sect R:4
2. Rabiger M. *Directing the documentary*. Focal Press, Boston, Mass. 1992, p. 17

Janis Hass is a freelance writer and documentary filmmaker. Her documentary, *Harvest Queens*, will air on TVOntario's "The View From Here" on Sept. 2, 2007.

ALL FORGIVENESS

Confession of our faults is the next thing to innocence.

— Publius Syrus, maxim 1060

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