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Can't afford not to act

As a nurse, I am held responsible to follow a set of ethical principles that guide my work: non-maleficence (do no harm), beneficence (do good), respect for the autonomy of individuals, truthfulness and justice.

I am proud to be achieving the first four principles in my work, but to achieve justice — to provide all my patients with the best care possible — is impossible within our unjust health care system.

My patients have served our communities as farmers and police officers, raised children, been in the military, and now are aging or disabled and need help from their communities to stay safe and well. I am deeply committed to every single one of my patients, yet am often powerless to help patients who cannot afford their prescriptions, delay needed care due to costs, or go into medical debt due to the care they receive and then struggle to meet their other basic needs.

One of my patients recently was unable to afford one of his pain medications that helps control severe pain in his hands and feet. For nurses, whose mission is to meet the immediate needs of patients, there is nothing worse than knowing one of your patients is in pain and you are unable to do anything about it.

To advocate for my patients' needs, I have to look to changing our broken system, which serves those who afford to pay and companies that profit from others' illnesses. The Affordable Care Act is a step in the right direction but maintains this system of profit that keeps medical care expensive and leaves many under-insured and unable to afford co-pays and deductibles.

Act 48 was a landmark bill that committed Vermont to moving toward a universal, equitably financed system that would treat health care as a public good for all. The process was meant to be transparent and allow for participation from the public each step of the way.

In deciding not to recommend moving forward with universal health care, Gov. Peter Shumlin violated the human rights principles in Act 48 and unilaterally denied public input into his financing proposal.

I rallied and sat in at the people's house on Jan. 8 to remind lawmakers that the health care crisis in our communities is still very real. By sharing songs and stories of how the health care crisis has affected our lives, we brought the voices of everyday people into a space that is often reserved for moneyed interests. We brought the conversation out from behind closed doors and back into public

view.

I am speaking out because my patient living is pain due to the cost of his medicine and cannot afford to wait for the "right time" for universal health care. Neither can many other Vermonters struggling to meet their needs. Now is the time for a truly just system that lives up to our ideals for how we would like to treat all people. We can't afford anything less.

Jessica Morrison is a registered nurse living in Burlington.
