

In a new ranking of the health of people under 50, the U.S. is at the bottom of a list of 17 countries

The flu is almost as scary as the fiscal cliff. Television news seems to be giving as much time to reporting this year's reputed health disaster as it gave to the recently dodged financial disaster. Hypercaffeinated TV talkers are reporting from hospital emergency departments instead of the floor of the House of Representatives, but their messages are similar—cataclysm is at hand.

Not quite. This winter's flu outbreak is not the worst in recent years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On the other hand, it's bad enough, especially for those who are unlucky enough to catch the virus. Some of those who are avoiding the flu are not lucky but smart—smart enough to get a flu shot.

They are a minority. Less than a third of the people in the country get flu shots. Many of the vaccination avoiders seem to fear the shot more than the flu. A frequently heard canard is that flu shots actually cause one to get the flu.

The flu is America's health problem du jour, but in the scheme of the nation's health challenges it hardly rates a notice. The problem that deserves much more notice than it's getting is that Americans are among the least healthy people in the developed world.

A study by a panel of experts assembled by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council released last week presented an awful picture of the health of Americans under 50, showing it to be worse than that of their peers in all of the 16 other countries studied.

American men ranked last in life expectancy. American women ranked second from the bottom. This in a country that spends by far more on health care than every country in the study, which included most European nations as well as Australia and Japan.

Among other dismal findings, the U.S. has: the second highest death rate from heart attacks and lung disease; the highest rate of infant mortality; the highest rate of death by violence, with gun homicides at least 20 times higher than other countries in the study; the highest rate of women dying from complications of pregnancy and childbirth; the lowest probability of living to age 50.

Americans pride themselves on being exceptional. The most nationalistic among us sometimes use the term "American exceptionalism" to extoll our culture as superior. The country that is the world's longest surviving representative democracy and has the world's largest economy and the most powerful military certainly has some bragging rights.

But the study illuminating the negative American exceptionalism in health confers no

American health is exceptional—in the worst way

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bragging rights, of course. Rather, it comes with an imperative to wake up and face the fact that in caring for the well being of our citizens we are not the best—we are the worst.

The panel recommended some general and obvious solutions, including universal health insurance, more efforts to encourage healthy behavior, a more effective safety net for the poor, better gun control.

It is telling that all of those recommendations, which are widely embraced by healthier countries, are controversial here, a clue, perhaps, to the source of the problem.

The panel chairman observed that the fact that the American culture “wants to limit the intrusion of government into our personal lives” may hamper efforts to improve the health of the citizenry.

If that’s rugged individualism, it’s coming at the price of shortened lives.

When those TV reporters hanging out in emergency rooms get over their flu fixation, maybe they will discover America’s far more dangerous health problem—falling behind the rest of industrialized world in taking care of its citizens’ health.