Catalyst: You assert that people with chronic illnesses or disabilities are best served through a combination of medical-care services, provided by doctors and hospitals, and community-care services, provided by homemakers, personal care attendants, and the like. Yet you say these two sectors often operate in “parallel universes.” Can you give an example of that?

Leutz: The one that people run into most often—and where people are most vulnerable—is after-hospital care. For example, a person on a prescribed set of medications goes into the hospital, where there exists a different formulary for medication. The hospital changes the patient from this heart drug to that heart drug, from this blood-pressure pill to that blood-pressure pill. After he’s sent home, the linkage between the hospital and the home-care system falls apart. The families and the home-care providers are left not knowing what they should be doing.

Catalyst: How do we better integrate medical-care and community-care services?

Leutz: For the typical elder person with a disability or a chronic illness, I’ve argued for a system I call coordination, in which a single point of contact who has standing in both the medical system and the home-care system—usually a nurse—can monitor the patient and call a doctor when there is an issue. You don’t have to set up special payment systems, you don’t have to assemble teams, and it’s feasible for a very broad segment of the population.

Catalyst: What are the main impediments to the two systems’ better working together?

Leutz: The lack of home-care benefits, except for the poor through Medicaid, is the biggest problem. But that’s not all. Medical providers—doctors, nurses—are interested in diagnosis, in treatment, in cures. On the home-care side, you have social workers, early-childhood education professionals, and therapists who are interested in functionality and social relationships. It’s a challenge to have people from different orientations collaborating.

Catalyst: You’re a strong proponent of Social HMOs. How do they work?

Leutz: They’re programs that add a long-term-care benefit to Medicare. Members join like they join an HMO. The program delivers all their medical services, and if they have a disability, they are assigned a care coordinator who helps them choose long-term-care supports. There’s a saying that goes, “Medicare stops at the bathroom door.” Medicare will pay for a wheelchair, which will get you to the bathroom, but it won’t pay for bath bars, it won’t pay for raised toilet seats.

Catalyst: You spent a year studying the new national long-term-care insurance programs in Germany and Japan. What did you learn?

Leutz: That they accept that we’re all in it together. They set up systems for long-term care that pay for everybody, and they finance it through broad-based tax mechanisms.

Catalyst: If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing about the way America cares for its elderly, what would it be?

Leutz: I would create an entitlement for home- and community-based long-term care and a care coordinator as part of Medicare. It creates a stable friend as a resource for families. That person who knows the system and is an advocate for people is really important.

Walter Leutz is an associate professor at The Heller School for Social Policy and Management.