



## Extra fees for uninsured services

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Imagine that you are celebrating a special occasion in a wonderful restaurant. The waiter brings your food and then you realize that you do not have any cutlery. When you ask for some, the waiter explains that because the cost of washing your cutlery is not included in the bill, a fork and knife will cost you extra. Later, when you ask for the bill, he explains that the cost of printing a copy is not included either. Another extra. Then, as you prepare to leave, you are asked to pay another fee for your car, which you parked in the restaurant's parking lot, on the pretext that snow removal costs are very high this year! If this actually happened, it is very unlikely that you would return, no matter how good the restaurant was ... unless it was the only one in town!

As absurd as this scenario might seem, it describes the delivery of health care in our country. We have a health care system that is replete with extra fees for uninsured services.<sup>1,2</sup> Take parking, for example. Should we have to pay to park at a hospital? We are not there for the fun of it, after all. After paying the parking fees a few times, you begin to realize how expensive it is to park at a hospital. What about patients who need regular tests, patients undergoing chemotherapy, or family members who visit sick relatives every day? It is better to be rich and in good health, than poor and in bad health, as the joke goes.

Physicians might not have anything to do with the cost of parking, but they have a lot to do with myriad other fees that their patients are charged. Some charge their patients for ophthalmic drops before performing a vision examination. Others charge for cortisone shots. Are these products not part of the service physicians provide—and for which they are paid by the government? Even when these products are not reimbursed, is it ethical to charge an excessive fee or to make a massive profit? Picture a

carpenter charging extra to sharpen his saw. Why do physicians not charge extra for facial tissues, gloves, and lubricant? Maybe because they cannot!

Family physicians are just as guilty of charging for certain services. Many charge for the simplest of medical certificates. True, we are constantly being asked to fill out forms, some of which are long and complicated. True, employers and insurance companies often abuse our services by asking for redundant certificates. And, true, our patients often use us as a means of qualifying for various benefits.

But there is a limit. When I hear that physicians charge patients a cancellation fee when they miss an appointment or that physicians charge patients to fax a prescription to the pharmacy or that physicians charge for the liquid nitrogen they use, I wonder about their professionalism. Can they not see that these service charges are irritating patients and causing them to lose respect for us? Many patients would say that physicians are being paid out of their taxes and should not be charging extra. It is like medicine has become a business.

I cannot help picturing these physicians, many years ago, when they were applying to a faculty of medicine and asserting that they wanted to become physicians so that they could help the world and save lives ... really?

If that is what they believed they would do, what happened? Have their motivations changed over time? Have their lofty dreams and ideals been replaced by more mercenary concerns? That would be a shame! 

### References

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