

# Most Doctors Declared Willing To Help Financially-Burdened Patient on Bill

Editor's note: This is the last of three dispatches by last year's president of the American Medical Association examining misunderstandings between the public and the medical profession.

By Dr. ELMER HESS  
Written for United Press

"A hundred and sixty dollars for a stay in the hospital when I had my operation" exclaims a housewife. "Seems to me medical costs are certainly going up!" ... "My gall bladder cost me \$1700," a business man reports. ... "My doctor charged me \$500 for an appendectomy!" exclaims a third person.

Hidden in these three comments are some clues to problems in the economic realm of medicine. And interestingly enough, these clues lead to some surprising conclusions.

The housewife who exclaimed about her hospital bill was reflecting an opinion that about one in four Americans hold—that such costs are spiraling rapidly. This view has caused enough concern in the medical profession that some probing has been going on to get the facts.

Do you really think it costs more to be sick today than it did 10 or 20 years ago? It's true Americans are spending more for medical care—but they are spending more for almost every other item these days, too. The economy since the end of World War II has been an inflationary one.

But how do medical and hospital costs stack up in terms of prices for other commodities and services. Actually, the portion people spend for medical care hasn't changed much in 25 years, according to data from the U.S. Department of Commerce. The percentage spent for medical care has remained slightly more than 4 per cent—and the percentage spent for physicians' services has remained at the 1.2 per cent level for several years.

**Look at Percentages**  
Translating these statistical percentages into practical terms, you can buy your medical care for a smaller percentage of your wages today than you could 20 years ago. The amount of medical care which would have cost a whole week's wages in 1935 to 1939 costs only about one-half a week's wages today. Despite much higher living costs, we still charge the same fees in our clinic we did 30 years ago.

For the first time, Americans are spending more for hospital care than they are for physician's share of the "medical care dollar" declined from 33

cents in 1929 to 27.2 cents in 1955, whereas the hospital's share rose from 14 to 27.8 cents. Does that mean the public has a legitimate complaint about rising hospital costs? Well, don't forget that hospital services are considerably expanded these days. Modern medicine calls for increasingly expensive diagnostic and therapeutic equipment—plus a larger crew of people to provide care. Hospitals have to pay higher wages today, just as businesses do. They are competing for help in an employees' market.

Furthermore, hospitals are more exposed to inflationary forces than are physicians. Prices for nearly every item a hospital must purchase—whether it be equipment or the services of personnel—have climbed in the past 10 years. It isn't likely these costs will level off until other prices level off correspondingly.

However, hospital stays are shorter today than they were in the past. The average stay now is seven days compared to 20 days in 1937. Then you paid \$8 per day; today, you pay \$20 per day. Figure it out yourself. Your hospital stay for the same illness in 1937 cost \$160 while today it costs \$140. Here's where you reap the benefits of medical progress, which reduce length of illnesses tremendously in many instances.

**Good Old Days**  
The good old days when hospitals never questioned where the money was coming from are gone. Today there are no fairy godfathers to pick up the checks for the hospital deficit. Hospitals must operate in a business-like manner even though they are non-profit.

When that businessman told his friends his gall bladder cost \$1,700 he may have been telling the truth. Or, as he may have been indulging in a bit of exaggeration, just as one of my own patients was.

I was in the barber's chair one day, my face covered with a hot towel, when a man in the next chair began to talk about his recent hospital visit. He named a fee he had been charged for my services—a fee, I might add, that was \$1200 more than I really had charged—and he even sounded somewhat proud of his bill! Then he went on to tell the barber how expensive medical care was and took the hospital apart for his charges. About this moment the barber took the towel off my face. Needless to say, my patient was surprised, and very much

embarrassed to see me.

Bragging a little about how much we pay for things is certainly a human trait. Probably more of us are guilty of it than we'd care to admit. But on occasions it can certainly give a completely erroneous picture of a situation. Of course, I think most doctors are quick to realize the way people feel about bills for medical and hospital care. Naturally they are reluctant to pay. They didn't ask to be sick. They are forced into buying an unwanted service. Forging out cash for an illness you resent hurts a lot more than paying for a new television set or some other wanted item. Furthermore, doctors know that once a patient is well, his gratitude for medical services fade rapidly.

That's why the American Medical Association has been encouraging all physicians to discuss fees with patients and to reach an understanding about the approximate costs before rendering extensive care. This is also the reason physicians are giving increasing attention to the business side of medicine. They are coming to realize that people resent erratic billing practices which doctors often carry on, and that mistakes in bills don't endear doctors to their patients. They know, too, that itemized medical bills are less likely to be understood than the old-fashioned "for professional services" type of doctor bill.

**Collection Procedures**  
Another complaint the public sometimes airs about the medical profession is that the collection procedures used are poor. In the past a doctor generally has turned over that phase of his practice to his secretary or office girl. Now more and more doctors are realizing the importance of following up collections in a business-like way, but using special considerations when necessary.

A doctor is entitled to a fair fee and I've found that most patients want to pay their own obligations. Occasionally they get financially ship-wrecked and it is in these cases that physicians and businessmen part company. Where the businessman gets tough, the doctor is more inclined to say, "If you've got some reason for not making the payment, will you please come into the office and talk to me about it? We want to help you in anyway we can." More and more doctors are helping patients budget for big medical expenses, on the "time-pay" basis so widely used in America.

And traditionally, the medical profession willingly takes care of those who can't pay.

But what about that third individual who said: "My doctor charged \$500 for an appendectomy!" I know of one instance where a woman did get a bill for that amount for a simple appendectomy of her daughter. The woman was a widow making her own way, and told me she just couldn't pay that amount. The usual fee for an appendectomy of that type in my part of the country was about \$150. Well, I told the woman I'd talk to the doctor. He was a young man with special surgical training.

"Doctor Hess," he told me, "\$500 is what I charge for any operation. I feel my special training entitles me to a bigger charge for a comparable operation than ordinary doctors get in this community."

I explained to him that physicians, regardless of their training, take care of sick people and I pointed out that he was making a mistake placing a monetary standard on his valuable services. "You'll get more happiness and satisfaction out of rendering a service of this sort than you'll ever get from any financial gain," I told him. I advised him to charge a fee the patient could pay. Well, the young surgeon went to see the woman, settled his fee for a very small sum, and later he told me it had been a marvelous experience.

I admit there are some glaring examples of men who put money before medicine. But it is a difficult thing for me. After traveling the length and breadth of this country, to believe that money is the sole interest of physicians and that they have little or no regard for the financial and economic problems of their patients. The public bears out my feelings on this—for five out of six say, "I like my doctor." Five out of six say "My doctor's fees are reasonable"—and nine out of ten deny doctors plan to get rich quick.

**NO CAUSE FOR ALARM**  
Detroit—U.P.—A furry little skunk holed up under a car Tuesday and held off 10 policemen until a Canadian cougar hunter came to the rescue. Things remained stalemated until hunter Jack Bradley, 42, came along. Bradley took a long look at the skunk, said it was descended, grabbed it and turned it over to the grateful police.

## Quotes From the News

By UNITED PRESS

Seattle—Dave Beck, president of the International Teamsters' Union, answering charges that union funds were used by Oregon Teamsters organizer Clyde C. Crosby to purchase an airplane ticket for a Seattle gambler: "In my opinion, if he did buy the ticket, that was a mistake."

Berlin—Soviet Defense Minister Georgi Zhukov, speaking at an East Berlin reception after signing a Soviet-East German agreement on the continued stationing of 22 Russian divisions in Red Germany:

"It is not our fault that the aggressive imperialist circles, who are holding to their course of a policy of strength and cold war, still do not take into account the interests of the working people and the results of their policy, which can only lead the world to a new devastating war."

Chicago—Famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, on learning the Chicago Theological Seminary plans to tear down Robie House, one of his favorite creations:

"A religious organization has no sense of beauty. You can't expect much from them."

Washington—FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover, charging that the U.S. Communist Party still respond to the will of Moscow: "It still works for the destruction of the American way of life and it still is dedicated to the building of a Soviet United States."

Washington—Sen. Thomas C. Hennings Jr. (D-Mo.), on introducing a resolution in Congress which would demand that the State Department issue a new passport to newspaper reporter William Worthly, who defied a ban and went to Communist China: "Although this resolution deals with a single passport application, I think its ramifications are very wide. It deals with one element of the principle of information which is so important to a dynamic and informed public opinion in a democratic society."

## Around Hollywood

By ALINE MOSBY  
United Press Correspondent

Hollywood—U.P.—While the movie industry burns, CBS' "Playhouse 90" has been stealing top properties from under Hollywood noses.

Both the public and show business laughed when CBS sat down to try television's first 1½ hour live dramatic show last fall. Yet "Playhouse 90" has not only survived but has been snaring up dramas that the movies are planning to do.

Thursday night, the highly-rated program will present "The Last Tycoon," F. Scott Fitzgerald's last novel that is being considered by major movie-makers for filming. And "The Helen Morgan Story" will be seen on "Playhouse 90" in May—to the dismay of Warner Bros. which is making a much-publicized movie of the same name starring Ann Blyth and Paul Newman.

**Book Followed Closely**  
Fitzgerald fans will be happy to hear from "Playhouse 90" producer Martin Manulis that his "The Last Tycoon," starring Jack Palance, will stick closely to the book. "Fitzgerald died before finishing the novel but he left a lot of notes," explained Manulis. "He apparently planned the ending to include a melodramatic double murder. However, Don Maciewicz, who did our script, wrote a different ending."

Procuring the story of blues singer Helen Morgan was an even greater triumph for Manulis. He heard a rumor that the Warner studio "for some reason" failed to nail down the TV rights when it purchased the movie story of Miss Morgan's life. "I called New York on a Sunday and found out the TV rights were available," said Manulis. "The next day we signed Lulu Morgan, Helen's mother, to give us the story."

Miss Blyth and Newman already were in their jazz age costumes doing the movie when they heard CBS would get its story, starring Polly Bergen (one of the losing contenders for the movie role) on TV first.

But, as they say in television, that's the way the cookie crumbles.

Another forthcoming "playhouse 90" will present "Goodnight, Sweet Prince," the book about John Barrymore. Warner Bros. soon begins shooting of "Too Much, Too Much," the life of Barrymore's daughter Linda.

## Nixon Takes Plane For Sudan Capital

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia—U.P.—Vice President Richard M. Nixon left by plane today for Khartoum, capital of the Sudan, which recently won its independence from British and Egyptian rule.

While in Addis Ababa he conferred with Emperor Haile Selassie on American aid for Ethiopia, development of the Nile river, economic and military problems and general questions such as the American attitude toward supporting the independence of African nations.

Nixon told a press conference that Africa is increasingly becoming an "economic and ideological battleground" between Communism and the free world and called on the United States and other free nations to help the African nations win independence.

## Bereaved Model Tries To Put on Show

Walthamstow, Eng.—U.P.—Blonde model Judy Hull walked onto the stage in a fashion show Tuesday wearing a white lace wedding dress and carrying a bouquet.

Spectators applauded. The 20-year-old Judy burst into tears. The crowd dropped in front of her.

"We apologize," the fashion commentator told the audience, "but the girl learned today that her fiancé had been killed." Judy's fiancé, U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. John Watkins, 27, of Cleveland, Ohio, and two other U.S. pilots were killed Monday in a collision between an F84F Thunderjet and a T33 Shooting Star jet trainer.



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