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President's Column: Don't Be Fooled by Headlines on Hospital Transparency

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Motive behind constant attacks on hospital transparency is clear: Insurance companies and pharmaceutical manufacturers want to pay hospitals even less for care provided in your community.

Key Points

- The head of the Wisconsin Hospital Association argues that recent reports on hospitals failing to meet price transparency rules are misleading.
- Wisconsin hospitals have corrected minor, technical errors that led to warning letters and have not received any fines for noncompliance.
- The author claims that insurance companies and other healthcare "middlemen" lack the same level of price transparency as hospitals.
- Wisconsin's largest health systems reported a 2.2% average operating margin in 2024, reinvesting profits into patient care.
- The author suggests that criticism of hospital price transparency is a tactic by insurers to increase their own profits.

Recently, the Associated Press ran a national story on a list, "obtained exclusively" by the AP, of 500 hospitals across the country that have received warning letters from the federal government for noncompliance with federal price transparency regulations.

While stories like this might generate catchy headlines and clicks, there is nothing newsworthy with this "exclusive" list as it is the same data that has been made available to the public for years. In Wisconsin, these warning letters have been triggered by minor, technical errors like an incorrect address or file format—the equivalent of a misplaced comma on an otherwise perfect essay. The complete story beyond the headline in Wisconsin is that no hospital has received a fine for noncompliance, as every Wisconsin hospital quickly corrects the minor errors identified by federal regulators.

In Wisconsin, patients are fortunate to have hospitals that have long committed to both price and quality transparency. Hospitals in the Badger State have invested millions and millions of dollars to comply with federal price transparency regulations; resources that could otherwise go towards patient care, while middlemen in the system are ignored by regulators and evade transparency headlines in the media.

Price transparency on Wisconsin hospital websites

As the head of the Wisconsin Hospital Association, I can personally guarantee that you will find a "Price Transparency" link on the front page of every Wisconsin hospital website.

Through this link, a patient will have access to a machine-readable file and tools, like a price estimator or shoppable services list, that will help patients find the data they need. WHA is so confident in that fact, we created our Price Finder tool on www.wha.org to provide patients with easy and direct access to every hospital price transparency webpage.

If you have questions, hospital financial assistance and counseling staff are only a phone call away to help patients understand their bill, receive price estimates, and seek financial assistance to help patients afford their care.

After you look up your own hospital website, you should do the same with your insurance company, your pharmacy benefit manager (PBM) or even the manufacturer of the prescription drugs you depend on.

Do all these middlemen have the same "Price Transparency" link on the front page of their website with access to files that list prices for every service they contract for?

Do they have a price estimator tool to help you understand what today's price is for your prescription drugs?

If not, should you demand that your elected officials force them to provide the same price transparency data as hospitals?

Access to transparent pricing data is far better with your local hospital than any of these middlemen.

A longtime friend and former colleague would often remind me that hospitals existed long before the third-party payer system that has made healthcare so complicated and full of middlemen. While hospitals and providers are the face of healthcare for patients, many other entities are pulling invisible strings that negatively impact patient care.

Our hospitals are just as frustrated as the American public with how complicated and costly our health care system has become, with more entities putting themselves between patients and their providers while pulling profit out of the pockets of employers and families.

For-profit companies implement policies detrimental to patient care

National for-profit health insurance companies and PBM's continue to report multi-billion-dollar annual profits while implementing policies that are detrimental to patient care and, as a desperate deflection tactic, attack your local community hospital along the way.

By contrast, Wisconsin's largest health systems, representing roughly 80% of Wisconsin's hospitals, reported an average operating margin of just 2.2% in 2024. Believe it or not, that is an improvement from the two previous years when the average system operating margin was negative.

In 2024, there were 41 Wisconsin hospitals, about one-quarter of the state's hospitals, with an operating deficit. For those hospitals that were able to generate a positive margin, these resources are used to hire more physicians, nurses and invest in new technologies to bring better care closer to home. Unlike middlemen, these resources are not siphoned off to investors – they are reinvested in the very healthcare you depend on.

For people to see change, it will take policymakers and politicians who are willing to hold the middlemen in our healthcare system accountable rather than those who scapegoat hospitals based on a convenient headline and easy talking point.

The motive behind these constant attacks on hospital transparency is clear: well-funded, publicly traded insurance companies and pharmaceutical manufacturers want to create a shiny object for politicians and pay hospitals even less for care provided in your community. Do not be fooled; cutting hospitals is not about helping patients lower their costs, it is about increasing profits for shareholders on Wall Street.

When this happens, Wisconsin communities suffer.

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