

SPENDING SMART

Pleading your case on medical bills is a sound policy

By Bina Venkataraman, Globe Correspondent | February 18, 2009

When Nicole Stamas of Hudson, N.H., got slapped with a \$1,720 bill in November for an ambulance trip between two hospitals that was not covered by her insurance policy, she could not afford it. She's 22, works full time as an optician at Sam's Club, and hopes to start saving money to go back to school to study interior design.

Rather than panic, Stamas remembered reading a newspaper article about a couple who had negotiated a discount on their medical expenses. She wondered if she could do the same. She sought help from a health advocacy group that helped her draft a letter to the ambulance company explaining her financial situation and she included a \$50 check from her flex spending account to show the company she had good intentions.

Two weeks later, she received a call from the financial services department of the ambulance company. The company was willing to knock off nearly half her bill and offered her a payment plan of \$50 per month, interest free.

If, like Stamas, you are struggling to pay your medical bills, you are not alone. But you might be missing an opportunity to haggle with your doctor, dentist, or even the hospital billing department to get a better deal.

"Not enough people know that medical bills are negotiable," said Andrew Cohen, Medical Debt Program Manager for The Access Project, a Boston-based group that trains healthcare service organizations around the country to help people deal with medical debt. (Cohen helped Stamas with her letter, but says the group is shifting away from giving direct advice to patients.) "Hospitals and other medical providers are often willing to work with people to give a discount or a payment plan."

The best way to keep out-of-pocket medical expenses low, of course, is to have insurance and to choose treatments and doctors in your insurance company's network. But if your insurance does not cover an exam or procedure, you should appeal to the company to have it covered, says Cohen. And whether or not you have insurance, you may qualify to have uninsured medical expenses, including copayments and prescription costs, covered by a public program such as the Health Safety Net.

When all else fails, you can, and you should, negotiate directly with the billing department of a hospital or clinic to have your bill discounted or to get charity services. But Cohen says if you seek public assistance or insurance coverage first, you will improve your chances of successfully haggling for lower medical bills.

What are the secrets to negotiating a lower medical bill? The Access Project recommends the following:

Think and act ahead. Request a cost estimate in advance and be upfront with the provider if you think you will have trouble paying. Although many doctors and hospitals will not know the precise cost until the examinations and procedures are complete, you will be in a better position to negotiate before you receive the care rather than after. Check www.nahdo.org to research the

going rate for medical services. As soon as you receive a bill that you cannot afford, contact the billing department of the hospital or clinic to let them know you are having trouble. Don't delay.

Pay in cash. This will both increase your likelihood of getting a discount and protect you from credit card and other forms of high-interest debt.

Make a personal connection. When you call a hospital billing department to negotiate a bill, ask to speak to a manager. Tell your story, don't be shy, be sincere. Explain briefly why you are having trouble paying. If you lost your job, had your work hours cut, or had some unexpected big expense, those can all serve as explanations. But the reason can also be simpler, such as that you have lots of bills piling up.

Write a letter to follow up on your request. Chronicle your reasons for requesting a discount or charity care. This allows you to outline the cost-saving measures you have already taken, such as asking for your insurance company or public programs to cover the expense, and makes your request official.

Be persistent. If you don't succeed at first, keep calling and writing, and ask to speak to people further up the management ladder. Keep careful records of who you speak to and when you speak to them.

There is also another way to save money on healthcare, that doesn't involve haggling over price. Just seek out lower cost medical services at the start.

If you don't mind being a test subject, the Forsyth School of Dental Hygiene at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences charges \$20 for adults and \$10 for seniors and children for a dental check-up, cleaning, and fluoride treatment.

Dental hygiene students under supervision by dentists do the work. You can also see if you qualify for free medical care at one of the state's community health centers. For details go to www.massresources.org, click on Health Care Programs, and then Health Safety Net. The safety net is available to residents of Massachusetts who are underinsured or who do not have insurance, regardless of citizenship status.

Bina Venkataraman can be reached at bvenkataraman@globe.com. ■