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Without Health Care, One Burger From Ruin

By [JIM DWYER](#)

Susan Halley didn't have the money.

The lawyer trying to collect it was sure she could find some.

"You have a car, right?" the lawyer said, as Ms. Halley recalled. "That's a luxury."

The car, an \$11,000 Mitsubishi bought with a loan, was how she got to work.

Ms. Halley was lost in the land of medical debt, a place where mind-boggling bills rain down like meteorites, crushing the solvent, the prudent, the responsible.

A [study of 2007 bankruptcy filings](#) found that nearly two-thirds were caused by medical bills. "Most medical debtors were well-educated, owned homes and had middle-class occupations," according to the study, published in The American Journal of Medicine. "Three-quarters had health insurance."

On the Saturday of [Memorial Day](#) weekend five years ago, Ms. Halley had her favorite meal, the cheeseburger deluxe, at a diner near her home in Queens. She was 25 years old and lived with her mother. She had graduated from [Baruch College](#) in Manhattan and was getting a master's degree in special education at Touro College. She also had a job: a little more than two months earlier, she had gone to work for a nonprofit group that helped disabled people.

By Sunday night, Ms. Halley was having sharp pains in the belly. The next morning, her family doctor gave her medicine. It didn't help. Her mother drove her to the emergency room at North Shore University Hospital/Manhasset.

At check-in, she was asked about her insurance coverage. Her new job provided benefits after three months. She was two weeks shy.

“The people taking the insurance information told me I would probably qualify somewhere along the road for some kind of assistance,” Ms. Halley said. “At that point, it didn’t matter. I needed help.”

Something — perhaps the cheeseburger, her doctors speculated — had given her an E. coli infection that was causing her to hemorrhage from the intestines.

“I got out of the hospital after six days, on a Monday,” she said. “They called me on the Saturday, at home, requesting that I pay this bill. They wanted \$400 a month.”

Her hospital bill was just over \$27,000. There was a second bill for about \$2,000 for doctors’ visits. Her entire salary for the year, pretax, was \$33,000.

“I told the man from the hospital that maybe I could do \$200 a month, and he rejected that,” she said. “They sent me the itemized bill, and most of it you can’t understand, because it’s all code. They told me to go on the Internet and try to sort it out.”

Some people are worried that the proposals for universal health coverage are a form of socialism. The standard American hospital bill is already a powerful instrument for redistributing income. Typically, hospitals’ list prices, like those Ms. Halley was charged, bear no resemblance to what is actually covered and paid by private or government insurance. So only the uninsured, like Ms. Halley, are actually asked to pay those amounts.

“People don’t think of medical bills as negotiable, but they are,” said Andrew Cohen, who helps people manage medical debts for the [Access Project](#), a nonprofit group based in Boston.

Ms. Halley said her efforts to haggle went nowhere. “It was their demand or nothing,” she said.

Terry Lynam, a spokesman for the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, said that the hospital preferred to avoid legal confrontations and to find a way for people to pay, but that Ms. Halley did not file an application for financial assistance that she was given during the early stages of the dispute. Ms. Halley, however, said that when she

asked about discounts, she was told that because she did not have children, she did not qualify for a state program that provides insurance coverage for lower-income families.

“I went to school, held a job and paid taxes,” Ms. Halley said. “I was trying to pay my own way in the world. The health care system didn’t work out for me.”

Her brother, 10 years older, had a stroke when he was 29 and was working in a small business, without health insurance. He declared bankruptcy after his bills reached about \$60,000, she said.

In her case, the hospital turned the bill over to a law firm. The lawyers “threatened me: if I didn’t pay this, they were going to sue me,” Ms. Halley said. They did. Then they filed a judgment. Her credit score plummeted. Her bank account, with \$300 in it, was frozen.

By then, she was working in the city school system and juggling her debts. “I’m thankful the assistant principal let me use the fax machine,” Ms. Halley said — “and let me come out of the classroom when I needed to cry.”

She made a deal to pay the doctors’ bills at \$100 a month, but could not reach an agreement on the \$27,000 in hospital charges.

Last year, she contacted Mr. Cohen at the Access Project, and he helped her negotiate with the hospital. The \$27,000 charge was cut to \$8,000, which she is paying off at \$300 a month. “I’m teaching in the Bronx now,” Ms. Halley said. “So I’m still driving that luxury sedan, every day.”

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