It was Sunday morning and my 29-year-old daughter sounded very scared when she called her doctor-dad on the way to a Washington, DC, emergency department (ED). Overnight she had experienced high fever and shaking chills. In the early morning she had developed a severe headache and stiff neck—I told her I agreed with her decision to go to the ED. Relatively soon thereafter I got the next text: “They want to do a spinal tap.” I tried to reassure her that the test was the right thing to do, but she was understandably anxious. After a very long hour of waiting, a new text: “The fluid was normal, no meningitis.” We were all relieved.

Three weeks later she called again from New York, but this time she was crying: “I just got the hospital bill—$8,000! When I was in DC I had just left my last job—I don’t know if I was covered by insurance!” I could hear her fear—for three hours of care the bill was more than three months’ rent for her tiny New York apartment.

There is no excuse for the fact that Americans spend almost twice as much per capita on health care than the next most expensive country in the world. Both the Congressional Budget Office and Institute of Medicine agree that almost a third of this cost does not add value to patients’ care. Health care reform and passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) have begun the process of changing the organizing principles of US health care. The most egregious insurance abuses—benefits rescission, pre-existing condition exclusions—are now illegal. For most people, insurance benefits are a little more clear; elimination of copayments for preventive care and closing the doughnut hole for Medicare recipients have been addressed.

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On the phone my daughter was still afraid. I walked her through the $8,000 bill, starting with the title “Explanation of Benefits—this is not a bill.” She had still been covered by insurance, and the insurance worked: Young and healthy, my daughter needed emergency care, she got the care she needed, and the care did not cost her several months’ pay. She laughed through her tears, “I guess I should have read that first!”

Reference