**End Hidden Hospital Charges**

Imagine an elderly patient sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a hospital bill they can barely comprehend. They're already dealing with a life-threatening health problem, but now they have to figure out a bill filled with unfamiliar medical terms and a language they may not fully understand. If patients can't understand their own medical bills, how are they supposed to figure out what they're being charged for?

Medical bills can be incredibly confusing. They're often filled with complicated billing codes and unexpected charges, making it difficult for patients to figure out what they are actually paying for. Sometimes, there may be billing mistakes that patients don't notice because the bill is so difficult to read.

This confusion can add even more stress to an already difficult situation, as patients deal with health issues. Families have to worry about whether they're being charged correctly or trying to decode a complicated bill on top of their current emotional turmoil.

There are already efforts to make healthcare pricing more transparent, including requirements for hospitals to provide pricing information before treatment. However, even if patients know the price beforehand, the bill they receive afterward may not actually make sense.

Patients can still end up with charges they don't understand. Knowing the price isn't very helpful if the codes are too complicated you can't figure out what you're actually being charged for.

The End Hidden Hospital Charges petition is a petition asking the San Diego County Board of Supervisors to support clearer and honest hospital bills for patients to better understand the bills that they receive. This is in hopes of eventually pushing this bill to the state and federal levels to make a change. The students of Free Healthcare Initiative are proposing the Healthcare Billing Transparency Act (HBTA). Hospitals have to inform patients about their prices for treatments before, but no law covers the bill patients receive after treatment. The HBTA bridges this gap through two main ideas: Automatic itemized bills and Plain-language descriptions. Automatic itemized bills are detailed bills patients should receive that lists each charge separately without asking for it. This bill should arrive within five business days and the bill should not include any group charges or lump-sum payment without the patient's consent in writing. The other idea is to include plain-language descriptions which translate confusing medical billing codes into simple, everyday language, so patients understand what they are paying for.

The Healthcare Billing Transparency Act matters because medical bills are filled with medical codes and vague terms that most people can't read or understand. With line-by-line translations and plain-language descriptions patients will be able to see exactly what they are being charged for allowing them to feel more confident when paying their bills. This inclusion allows patients to catch potential errors in their bills such as double charges or charges for treatments they have never received. Around 80% of U.S. medical bills have at least one mistake, adding these plain-language descriptions will allow those mistakes to be found easily. This act gives families more control over their healthcare expenses. When families understand their bills, they can question charges, plan their budgets, and avoid surprise costs. The act also makes hospitals more accountable. When bills are clear and detailed, hospitals can't hide charges in bundled or confusing line items, which pushes them to bill fairly and accurately.

Patient care is to support people, and when they can’t tell whether a charge is correct, they are lifted with an uncomfortable choice to either pay the charge they aren’t sure they owe, or delay paying. In such scenarios, families are going through a lot and uncertainty would become another thing they have to deal with. Being able to understand and read your bill is part of being able to take care of your health. In recent years, there has been progress with bill transparency with hospitals posting standard charges before care. This idea builds on that change, now asking hospitals to not create something entirely new, but instead advocate for the bill patients receive to be as clear with the prices posted beforehand. That small fix that could help multiple families.

Anyone should be able to read a hospital bill without a medical degree. Every patient and family deserves to know what they are being charged for and why. This change starts with me. Next time a bill arrives for either you or your family to pay, check that every charge on there is truly right. Ask the billing office what a charge means, and ask for an itemized copy if you don't have one. You can talk to your family and friends about their experiences, because most people have stories to share, and the more we share them, the harder it is to ignore this problem. Clear billing is a basic expectation, and it's one that patients, families, and hospitals can all work toward together.