

Night of the gatekeeper



The boy had kept nothing down for three days, ever since coming back from his vacation in Mexico. For the past six hours he had been vomiting continuously, and by now he was dehydrated and could no longer sit up. The mother was becoming hysterical, and at 11 pm the father, a professor at the medical school, now thoroughly alarmed, decided to call the health medical organization (HMO). He had joined this some time earlier when the university had offered coverage at a lower rate than his private insurance. It was understood at the time that the children were to have their own pediatrician.

On that night a nurse answered the call. At once she began to fire questions. Did the boy have a fever? Diarrhea? Was the vomit yellow or green? Had the father taken the pulse? The temperature? Had anything like that ever happened before? Were the other children affected?

At last the father interrupted and asked to speak to the doctor. "Not possible," said the nurse, "the doctor is off duty." She agreed to call another doctor, then phoned back to say that the doctor had suggested trying some ginger ale and bringing the boy to the office in the morning.

Further negotiations ensued, the father insisting that something had to be done that night. Again she said she would call back. This time she announced that "the doctor said you could take him to the emergency room." But as the local hospital had no contract and was "out of network," they had to travel 15 miles to a hospital in the city.

There in a crowded emergency room they waited two hours before being called. A grave looking intern suggested giving the boy ibuprofen. "Don't you think he might be dehydrated?" asked the father. The intern looked again, grudgingly agreed, and ordered two liters of saline. This was administered, though not before the nurse missed the vein twice. The boy perked up immediately, and as the sun rose over the awakening city the parents drove their child back to their suburban home.

Two weeks later the father received a bill for \$1900 (£1180) for an "unauthorized emergency room visit." He wrote back explaining that the nurse had authorized the visit. A lively correspondence ensued and is still continuing.

Needless to say, he is not pleased with his HMO, nor is much of the American public. Complaints range from mindless bureaucracy and limitations on prescribing, hospitalizations, or referrals to specialists, to the recent brouhahas about one day hospital deliveries, outpatient ("drive by") mastectomies, giving doctors financial incentives to limit care, and forbidding them to discuss alternative treatment options. But already managed care organizations have enrolled more than 50 million Americans; and another 50 million are expected to be signed up by the year 2000. Corporate is the wave of the future, and the personal family practitioner may soon be going the way of the buffalo and the bison.