



fair telecoms campaign

Mail on Sunday article covering misuse of 070 "personal numbers" for "premium rate service"

press cutting



The Mail on Sunday OCTOBER 5 • 2014

OCTOBER 5 • 2014 The Mail on Sunday

Mugged in our

...by the NHS's hidden charges for everything from cold drinks and snacks to bedside TV sets and phones

WHEN 90-year-old grandmother Eleanor Taylor fell perilously ill, her anxious family kept a constant vigil at her hospital bedside for three weeks. But after Eleanor lost her battle with chronic heart and lung disease, their understandable grief was mixed with a growing sense of anger due to the hidden costs they had incurred caring for and visiting the much-loved matriarch.

By Alice Smellie

They had opted to pay for Eleanor to have access to the television and phone system installed by her bed at Queen's Hospital in Romford, Essex - which, at about £10 a day, amounted to more than £200. And then there were the eye-watering phone bills that followed. When they couldn't be with her, various relatives would call to speak to her for a few minutes. On top of this were parking fees and the cost of grabbing a cup of coffee and a snack at the hospital.

Eleanor's granddaughter Wendy Fisher, 46, estimates that the family must have spent an astonishing £1,500 overall in those final weeks, including £20 a day on food for themselves and Eleanor, money on fuel, and sometimes more than £20 a day on parking.

The sum itself is arbitrary, she concedes. But when they were at their most vulnerable, it now seems there was a steady siphoning of money from the family. 'We wouldn't dream of penny-pinching, but we were effectively being held to ransom at an incredibly difficult time,' Wendy says. 'We felt mugged but we didn't even notice it at the time. We wanted Nan to be comfortable and to be able to stay in touch so we paid for the entertainment system, but it was difficult for her to use and actually distressed her.'

'She was completely bed-bound. Nan didn't use the phone to call us, but we'd call her. The £70 bill that arrived a few weeks after she passed away - from the calls we had made to her - came as a shock.'

THE SICKER YOU ARE, THE MORE IT COSTS

SADLY, this is by no means an unusual story. While Eleanor's family say they were just about able to absorb the costs, for many in a similar situation, such additional outgoings are out of reach.

Campaigners have now hit out at the 'insidious creep' of private companies offering what either should be provided on the NHS, such as decent food, or services that used to be free, like communal TV.

Research repeatedly shows that costs can be extraordinary. An online survey earlier this year by money-saving website voucher codespro.co.uk of 1,500 former hospital patients showed that many were spending more than £21 a day, including an average of £2.90 on a phone, internet and TV. The web-

site's chief executive Nick Swan says: 'Food was actually the biggest expenditure for patients - on average they spent £12.30 a day on meals - whereas for visiting relatives, parking was unsurprisingly the largest cost. Further research backs this up. Recent statistics from Macmillan Cancer Support shows that 83 per cent of those affected by cancer were £570 a month worse off, often through incurred expenses, while according to the charity CLIC Sargent, parents of children with cancer spend an extra £165 a month, including paying for extra accommodation. And Bliss, the charity for premature and special-needs babies, found that parents of an infant admitted for neonatal care face extra costs amounting to £2,256 during their child's stay in hospital. The more serious the illness, the longer the hospital stay - and the bigger the final bill.'

TUNE IN AND PAY OUT TODAY, personal television and phone systems are installed at hospital beds, rather than all wards having a communal TV room. Payment is made by bank card and patients can purchase pre-paid bundles of TV and phone time.

There are three main providers of such services. Hospedia is the largest company, with a presence in 150 hospitals - the others are Premier Telesolutions and Hospital Telecommunications Service. Hospedia spokeswoman Charlotte Collins says: 'Private providers have spent

THE SICKER YOU ARE, THE MORE YOU PAY: HOW THE COSTS ADD UP



hundreds of millions of pounds installing and operating these systems so that the NHS did not have to pay for them from public funds.'

Packages offered by her firm include those costing £10 a day, or £50 for two weeks, for access to 25 TV channels, wi-fi and radio.

In many hospitals, free communal televisions still exist. Yet one of the main providers, One Vision Digital, says in the past five years it has installed sets at just 28 sites.

'Hospitals have to pay us, whereas groups such as Hospedia do it for nothing,' points out managing director Paul Williams.

Paid-for entertainment systems

have created a kind of apartheid, according to David Hickson, of the Fair Telecoms Campaign.

'You have patients sitting next to each other - one with enough money to watch their favourite telly, and the other feeling ill and frustrated at missing out on their regular programmes,' he says.

THE PRICE OF CALLING A LOVED ONE

HOSPEDIA says patients signing up to use one of its bedside systems get free outgoing calls to landlines, while they pay about 25p a minute for calls to mobiles, and incoming charges are set by other call providers.

Hospedia says it makes about 35p a minute on calls made to its

hospital beds



phones. Communications watchdog Ofcom says the 070 numbers used by Hospedia typically cost 52p a minute to call from a landline, and there may also be a 51p connection fee. Calls from a mobile can be up to £1.50 a minute.

Due to its concerns over charges, Ofcom officials met Hospedia staff over the summer and urged it to introduce an alternative, cheaper service.

As a result Hospedia says it will switch from 070 numbers 'over the next few years'.

Hickson welcomes the fact that hospitals have lifted the ban on mobile phones on wards, which were once believed to interfere with sensitive equipment.

'But many older patients, who are

in hospital for a long time, don't like to use mobiles,' he adds.

FEEDING THE METER

PARKING is another major bugbear for frustrated patients and their families. In July, a newspaper investigation showed that 74 NHS hospital trusts made more than £500,000 from parking in the past financial year, with 46 taking over £1 million.

'Further research by Macmillan Cancer Support last year discovered that the average cost of hospital parking was £7.66 a day.'

The Department of Health issued new guidelines during the summer, advising hospitals to offer concessions including free parking for patients with cancer.

Lucy Allan, The Conservative candidate for Telford at the next

Election, says: 'The chief executive of our local hospital says that at only £3.50 a day, the parking charges are not unreasonable, but that soon adds up. Hospital parking charges should be scrapped altogether.'

She points out that in some cases, although people qualify for an exemption they have to pay the parking costs and then reclaim the money - and that's not always easy to do if you are unwell and undergoing gruelling treatment.

Wendy Fisher adds: 'When Nan was on the cusp of dying, we were feeding the meter constantly. You can't pay for more than five hours at a time, even overnight, so we simply had to go backwards and forwards to the car park.'

'What a thing to have to have to consider. When she passed away, I

had just got back from the multi-storey in time to say goodbye.'

TOO LATE TO TURN BACK

ACCORDING to a 2010 survey by the Soil Association, almost two-thirds of patients brought in their own food because the quality within hospitals was so poor. More than 30million hospital meals are left uneaten every year.

'Nan didn't like the food so we would bring her meals we had made at home,' says Wendy. 'While we were visiting, we had to eat and drink at the hospital - coffee at well over £2 a time and expensive sandwiches. Drinks such as Coca-Cola all seemed to be about 50p more than at the supermarket.'

A 2012 survey showed that shops in hospitals were charging up to 50 per cent more than supermarkets for confectionery and soft drinks.

Despite David Cameron's pledge at the Tory Party Conference last week to keep increasing investment in the NHS, Katherine Murphy, chief executive of the Patients Association, feels the Health Service budget is not always being spent on meeting basic needs.

'Hospitals should be properly supported by the Government without having to rely on charging patients and their visitors to prop up the finances. We urge the Department of Health to end the hidden charges on being sick.'

But Lucy Allan warns it might not be a simple fix, saying: 'NHS trusts are now in lengthy contracts with many private companies. You can't just change things. Somebody is going to have to pick up the tab.'

£140 on TV that Dad couldn't

THE father of drama teacher Sally-Ann Hitchcock spent more than a year in and out of hospital before he died from prostate cancer in August.

Sally-Ann, 44, from Surbiton, Surrey, says: 'Last summer I recall paying about £5 a day for my father John to watch television. Often, he'd just watch the carphones - he couldn't even sit up. 'Two weeks before leaving hospital, he was moved into a side room where there wasn't any

extremely hard to operate - he was only 73, but he had to pull the telly down, and press clumsy buttons. There wasn't a remote control. 'This year he was in for about a month again. This time we didn't bother with the telly and he couldn't use the free radio because he couldn't bear the earphones - he couldn't even sit up.'

'Two weeks before leaving hospital, he was moved into a side room where there wasn't any

telly or radio at all - not even one for which you could pay - and he went downhill rapidly.'

'Just having the news on in the background would have kept him in touch with the outside world. Illness is very isolating and he needed to know that the world was still turning.'

During this time, Sally-Ann was diagnosed with breast cancer and was treated at the same hospital.

She says: 'Parking was £3 for two hours and my mother would visit twice a day - she spent £336

operate

in a month. She brought food for us from home.

'There was a special TV room for people who were being discharged and I was given special dispensation to be in this room and watch it for free.'

'Dad later left and went into a hospice, where there were plenty of televisions, and against expectations he lasted another three weeks.'

'It may seem like a little thing, but it's a link to normality - it keeps your brain going.'



HIGH FEES: Sally-Ann Hitchcock with her late father John

David Hickson



Monday, 6 October 2014