
Defense Report

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Benefit Erosion—It's Real

Few people outside the military services fully understand the concern the military careerists have over erosion of benefits that have long been part of service life. The average citizen sees military commissary stores still operating, post exchanges doing a thriving business and military hospitals apparently treating the whole spectrum of patients. Nothing seems to be diminished.

His military neighbor, though, can tell the average citizen that he could probably find better deals on some items in the local discount store than in the PX. The military neighbor could also tell of having to wait in line watching ice cream melt and frozen food thaw as the shrinking number of commissary clerks attempts to do business-as-usual in spite of cost-saving "management improvement."

And, most dramatically, the military person could tell his civilian neighbor about having his wife or child turned away from a military hospital because there simply aren't enough health professionals on the staff to provide full family care. Yes, the military family still has health insurance in the form of a cost-sharing arrangement with civilian hospitals (CHAMPUS) but it is obvious that when you are forced to pay part of the cost of a service that has always been free, something has obviously been diminished.

In recent testimony before Congress, the Comptroller of the Army pointed out the false economy of forcing the use of CHAMPUS. The average cost per patient/day in an Army hospital is \$166. When military dependents are forced to use CHAMPUS the government must reimburse the civilian hospital an average of \$205 per day and the service family must pay an additional fee. The government winds up spending more and the family could accrue an indebtedness that, in the case of a military retiree on a limited income, may be impossible to satisfy.

The benefit of medical care is not being eroded for the most common reason—trying to save money—but because of the critical shortage of professional medical personnel. Two years ago Congress thought they had a way out of this predicament by establishing a new school to train health professionals for the military services. More than \$70 million has been spent on the school but now President Carter wants to close it before it can begin producing results. He prefers to go on recruiting military medics from the same sources that have thus far failed.

The President may be right. Maybe he knows a better way to find military doctors. But until he or someone else comes up with that better plan, don't tell a military family that their medical benefits and others, have not been eroded.

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