
Defense Report

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Charging a "Nuisance Fee" for Military Health Care—Some Bad Ideas Just Won't Go Away

There is a small group of senators assigned to the Senate Appropriations Committee who are convinced that if the dependents of active-duty military members and retirees and their families were charged a five-dollar "nuisance fee" each time they went to a military health care facility for treatment the use of those facilities would decline and money could be saved. This is not a new idea (the last time it surfaced the fee was proposed to be three dollars).

The most apparent weakness of this proposal is its negative impact on the families of junior enlisted members who are already skating on the thin edge of the poverty level and for whom the need for a five-dollar expenditure might come down to a choice between food and medical care. The plight of the junior members is exacerbated by two other facts: they are the ones who most often have young children needing treatment for typical childhood diseases; and they are already being squeezed financially by the imposition of a four-percent "cap" on their cost-of-living pay adjustment this year.

Some practical considerations have apparently been overlooked by the senators. There would be a substantial cost to establish a new bookkeeping system and 1,400 new employees would be needed. The likelihood of any eventual saving is very small.

Moreover, there are other very human considerations. Young men and women enlist in our volunteer forces with the understanding that medical care will be provided in military facilities without charge. They view ill-considered notions like this nuisance fee as a degradation of promises made to them at the time of enlistment. Those soldiers who are deployed overseas without their families already have cause to worry about the cost of maintaining a separate household with the "help" of a separation allowance that is pegged at a paltry \$30 per month. The nuisance fee heightens that worry.

The senators who revived this bad idea should consider these realities and forget it.