
Defense Report

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User Fee at Military Medical Facilities —Idea Is No Better This Year

Some ideas keep coming back no matter how often they are demonstrated to be ill-conceived, unworkable and even unfair. This seems to be especially true of suggestions purporting to save money. Such is the history of the proposal to charge military family members and retirees a user fee for using military medical facilities. Last year the Senate Appropriations Committee toyed with the idea of such a fee, but firmly rejected it after it was repeatedly demonstrated that no savings would result, its impact would be most severe upon those in the services who can least afford to pay it—married junior enlisted persons—and it could even increase medical costs within the Defense Department.

Now comes the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) with its suggestions for saving budget dollars and, you've guessed it, the user fee is back. The proposal has superficial appeal; unless challenged again, it is unlikely the arguments of last year will be recalled on Capitol Hill. So, for the CBO and Congress, here once again are the reasons why charging members of military families and retirees user fees at military medical facilities is a bad idea:

- The cost of administering the fee would exceed the amount derived from its collection.

- It would create a bureaucratic nightmare attempting to keep nationwide record of who had paid and how much among the highly transient military population.

- It may cause junior personnel to postpone seeking timely outpatient care which could result in higher inpatient costs.

- It would directly oppose another ongoing DoD program to encourage greater use of more cost-efficient military medical facilities rather than DoD's more expensive cost-sharing program whereby individual medical services are procured at civilian facilities.

- It contradicts the understanding given to our young men and women when they enlisted, that medical care would be furnished in military facilities without charge. Ill-considered notions like this "nuisance fee" are viewed by these young people as another broken promise.

The user fee was not a good idea last year; it has not improved with age.