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Waging Health Battles by Fax

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My patient needed his arthritis medication.

The local pharmacy couldn't get approval from his insurance company to fill my prescription for the painkiller Celebrex. They faxed me a form on which to make my case for the drug.

Completing the detailed form is my penance for trying to give a \$120-per-month Celebrex prescription instead of a \$4 generic. I support treating patients according to the best scientific evidence, including using standardized protocols that can improve quality and often reduce costs. But I've been this man's doctor for 11 years, and I know his medical needs. Over-the-counter acetaminophen and other arthritis products haven't helped him.

Still, his insurer thinks it knows better. And the company puts the burden on me to prove the necessity of my medication choice. The judge is someone who doesn't know my patient's history and who isn't a doctor.

The local pharmacies used to help us with these requests, but they have given up. The overhead burden was too great. There is a battle that goes on behind the walls of the family doctor's office every day. We try to get the medications and tests and referrals that our patients need while also seeing patients who require care. The insurance companies don't mind me taking heat from the patients when they don't get the medication I recommend. And they don't have to worry about the liability that I, as a doctor, face for using cheaper drugs that may put the patient at higher risk of complications.

They want me to incur the overhead and frustration that comes with trying to prove to a non-doctor that I know my patient and what I'm talking about. They want to cut costs, and they don't really care about how it affects my patients or my practice. If they make the process hard enough, they hope I'll just give up. There is even a term in the managed care literature for that kind of deterrence: the "[sentinel effect](#)."

A 2001 [study](#) showed that a doctor seeing 22 patients a day, averaged one insurance hassle lasting for every four or five patients. More than 40% of hassles were reported as interfering with quality of care, the doctor-patient relationship, or both.

I think the hassle factor has doubled in my practice since 2001. Most patients are minimally aware of the battles we fight daily on their behalf. They wonder why the office gets bogged down or why doctors or office staff don't call back. Sometimes I make it through all the hoops to get patients what they need. Sometimes I don't. I failed to convince a patient's insurance company to approve a stronger, brand-name cholesterol medication, because her triglycerides had remained uncontrolled on a generic medication for only five months, not six.

Next month I'll probably be able to get her what she needed in the first place, but my staff and I will be forced to do all the same paperwork again. Against the rising tide of paperwork, my office had to see 28 patients the day my Celebrex prescription was denied.

There was a woman with a miscarriage who had to come to the office right away. There was a patient who traveled 50 miles for pneumonia treatment. A 3-year-old needed stitches, and we fixed her finger instead of fixing our lunch.

I also took a call from an orthopedic surgeon. He'd just seen a debilitated patient of mine who was turned down twice by his HMO for a motorized scooter. With the specialist's help, maybe we'll get it approved on the third try. I planned to help my nurse with that pre-authorization for the Celebrex prescription. But then there was an asthmatic child to see and then a child with an allergic reaction to a bee sting. There were 23 other patients that day, and we did our best for all of them. We battled trauma, infectious disease, disability, Lyme disease, tooth decay and insurance clerks.

The only thing we didn't whip or fight to a draw was the clerks.

Due to his schedule and the volume of email he receives, Dr. Brewer may not be able to respond to all reader email. He does participate in his forum, where readers are urged to post. His email address is thedoctorsoffice@wsj.com.

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