

Let's put doctors back in charge of healthcare

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Your relatively new car, which you've only had for a few months, is overheating. Luckily, it's still under warranty.

This being the case, you take it to the dealership to have it checked out.

After about an hour, the mechanic calls you over to the counter where he tells you your car needs a new oil pump. But before you can breathe a sigh of relief, he tells you they called the warranty folks who said they can't put in a new oil pump before trying some other solutions first.

Apparently, the people who administer the warranty want them to try a different kind of oil before replacing the pump. What's more, if that doesn't solve the problem, they want them to try a new type of oil filter.

Only if those two remedies don't work will they authorize replacing the oil pump.

A little perplexed, you ask why they can't just replace the oil pump, since that's what the diagnostics indicate is the source of the overheating.

The mechanic agrees that's what they should do, but he's not actually in charge of repairing your car – the warranty people are.

And besides, replacing the oil pump is more expensive.

Quick question: Does this make any sense?

While you're pondering that situation, let me run another one by you.

Your mother hasn't been feeling well, so you take her to the clinic to see if they can figure out why.

The doctor examines your mother and says she'd like to run a PET scan as it should be able to pinpoint exactly what's wrong. But, the doctor continues, the insurance company said they wouldn't approve a PET scan as they don't think it's medically necessary.

Instead, they said the doctor could do an X-ray, which is not as reliable but should give the doctor some idea of what's going on with your mother.

And besides, the PET scan is a lot more expensive.

So they do an X-ray, which is inconclusive. The doctor then sends your mother home with some ibuprofen and tells her to get back in touch if she doesn't feel any better after a few days.

Over the next couple of months, your mother slowly gets worse. You take her back to the clinic, where the doctor again requests to do a PET scan. This time it is approved by the insurance company.

The PET scan reveals a tumor, which the doctor suspects is malignant. Luckily, there is a newly approved drug that has been shown to be extremely effective in treating the kind of tumor your mother has.

But when the doctor asks the insurance company to approve the drug for your mother, they say she should receive the more conventional drug therapy first. Only if she doesn't respond to that can she potentially receive the newer option.

And besides, the newly approved drug is more expensive.

So your mother undergoes conventional treatment for a few weeks but the cancer only gets worse. When the doctor again seeks approval to prescribe the new drug, she is told it has proven to be much less effective with advanced cancers such as the one your mother has.

Same question: Does this make any sense?

I think most people would agree the mechanic should have been allowed to replace the oil pump.

It should be just as obvious the doctor should have been allowed to decide the appropriate diagnostic and treatment options – not an administrator who is seemingly more concerned about the fiscal health of a corporation than the physical health of a human being.

Sadly, the situations described here are not that far-fetched – and can lead to potentially devastating outcomes.

Last question: Is it more important to save lives or save money?

We need to get our priorities straight in this country.



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