

## **If cancer doesn't kill you, the hospital bills will**



The American health care system reminds Delores Bishop of a giant trap. You get cancer, and the magic cheese saves you. Then the spring snaps, and you are caught like a rat.

Yes, we will fight your cancer, the system says, but in payment we will take all that you have saved, all your future income, and leave you and your husband destitute, without hope of recover, and racked by guilt, helplessness, and anger.

And guess what? This is a deal you can't afford to refuse!

So when Mrs. Bishop, who has been successfully treated for lung cancer, watched President Clinton's health care address the other night, she applauded. Her was a small lamp of hope being lit.

She got out a plastic grocery bag full of bills and opened a few to make her point. "I used to sit here and cry over them. Then I got this bag, and I just throw them in."

She pulled up an unopened envelope. "I've got fabulous doctors in Richmond, but their billing is terrible. I went in one morning for a biopsy, and was back home that evening. \$6,200! They billed me as an inpatient! We get bills from the doctor and bills from the hospital. Now this one's for \$1,568, and that's after the insurance has paid!" She threw the paper back into the bag.

"It hurts to know that you've got insurance, and then you've got to put up with all this stuff. It's getting terrible. There's so many court orders, and these bill collectors started calling and threatening. That's what got me. I was in bed sick, and a guy called and harassed me. They get really nasty. They scared me at first, but then I learned to live with it. They were not going to mess me up!" said Mrs. Bishop, showing the strength and determination that had helped her beat the cancer.

But having won the battle, could she win the war? "I told the doctor the last time I went, that I felt like I couldn't come back anymore (if I got sick again), because for 41 years, we've worked to get what little bit we've got. And I'd hate to see me get down and out, and my husband lose everything we've got." Her voice cracked for the first time.

Carl Bishop retired from Fort Pickett this year, and now, after 47 years of Army and Civil Service, has to pay \$330 a month for insurance, despite the government promise that at the end of his career he and his wife would be taken care of for the rest of their lives. It's not that the Bishops don't want to pay their bills. They are sending \$50 a month to the hospital, but that's like a drop in a bucket that never stops emptying. And they can't afford to cancel their insurance. Caught!

"You keep getting these bills, and you don't know what they are for. I went over there and told these people to get these bills straightened out because the insurance company is not going to pay them. But it just keeps going on. Here's one: \$850 for five minutes for a weekly radiation treatment!" She closed up the bag.

But Mrs. Bishop still feels lucky. At the hospital, she saw so many die, and seeing the children not come back was very hard, she said. She has friends who have been stripped of everything by the health care system. "I had a friend who was in the hospital for ten days, and they took everything he had."

And there was another friend, who died from lung cancer. In fact, Mrs. Bishop was bringing her flowers while she unknowing was also sick with the same cancer.

"It was a year ago that I got sick," she said. "Thought it was pneumonia because I had a pain across my back and couldn't breathe." She kept hoping it was bronchitis.

After the tests got back, that hope vanished. "When I got out of his office, it hit me. I had cancer! I just broke down and cried while my husband held me. "Alright, now we've got to go home and tell the kids," we said." The Bishops have five children and 12 grandchildren, all in this area. Mrs. Bishop would not be without loving support.

When she got back to Blackstone and the life she had left there, everything was different. "Cancer changes your outlook a lot. I see things in a different way, and I appreciate my grandchildren more," she said.

She had three chemotherapy treatments and radiation treatments following that. "The treatment doesn't hurt or anything, but it does weaken your system. I did get real sick with the second chemotherapy. The worst part was the hour and a half drive to the hospital."

But the last treatment was in May, and the cancer is in remission. “I can’t go like I used to, but I feel good. I go camping, fishing, walk downtown, and I thank God I’m where I am.”

But there are so many others in Blackstone who are “where she is,” and no one knows. “You’d be surprised how many people in Blackstone have cancer, but they don’t talk about it,” she said.

Mr. Bishop could feel the pressure to assume guilt for having cancer, but she refused to open that door. “I found talking about it helps. Don’t hide it!” she advised. “Anybody who would come over and listen to me, I’ll tell ‘em.”

And she’ll tell you about the battle with the hospital that saved her—which is now eating away, like cancer, at the immune system the Bishops thought they had paid for.