



Rep Porter: Congressional Clout Helped Erase My Medical Bills

Todd Shepherd

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Congresswoman Katie Porter (D, Calif.) revealed in a subcommittee meeting that a tangled mess of health care bills she was facing was cleared up when a patient advocate told the insurance company Porter had been recently elected to the House of Representatives.

In a Tuesday hearing titled "Protecting Patients from Surprise Medical Bills," the freshman representative told her personal story of needing an emergency appendectomy last August. She said she was shocked to get a bill for \$3,000 because one of the surgeons was out of her provider network.

"As I continued to fight my insurance company, I kept receiving bills from the surgeon," she said at one point. "Eventually, nearly five months after I was hospitalized, the surgeon was forced to simply request payment."

Porter had also claimed in her remarks that some documents she received in the mail had said her surgeon was in-network, but this matter never seemed to ever be fully factually determined.

Moments later, she said how the entire bill became settled.

"Finally, the patient advocate, invoking the fact that I had just been elected to Congress, was able to get the insurance company to agree to pay my surgeon's bill."

A patient advocate in this case was a doctor hired by Porter's employer to help workers navigate complicated health care billing issues.

The acknowledgement that a resolution only came once political clout was employed was not included in Porter's written remarks published by the committee.

While the use of political pull in this situation may not strictly violate House ethics rules, to some, the moment illustrates other problems with government's role in health care.

"If the United States had a free market in health care, there would be no reason for providers to be afraid of members of Congress," said Michael Cannon, the director of health care policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

"The fact that Miss Porter got a special deal when someone mentioned she is a member of Congress shows we already have a government run health care system."

"This is an appalling example of why people don't trust government," said Kendra Arnold, director of the watchdog group Foundation for Accountability and Civic Trust. "There should be absolutely zero tolerance for elected officials who use their position to receive special treatment. It is both unethical and un-American."

Porter's press secretary did not return a request for comment to the *Washington Free Beacon*.

Porter is in her freshman year representing California's 45th Congressional District.

The issue of "surprise medical bills" is one of the few policy areas currently drawing bipartisan support, especially now that talks between Trump and top Democrats about a possible infrastructure bill seem to be dead.

Republican Senator Bill Cassidy (La.) is leading the charge on a bill called the STOP Surprise Medical Bills Act.

"Patients should be the reason for the care, not an excuse for the bill," Cassidy said in a statement. "This is a bipartisan solution ensuring patients are protected and don't receive surprise bills that are uncapped by anything but a sense of shame."

President Trump has weighed in on the issue as well.

"In my State of the Union address, I asked Congress to pass legislation to protect American patients," the president said from the White House earlier this month.

"For too long, surprise billings—which has been a tremendous problem in this country—has left some patients with thousands of dollars of unexpected and unjustified charges for services they did not know anything about and, sometimes, services they did not have any information on. They weren't told by the doctor. They weren't told by the hospitals in the areas they were going to. And they get, what we call, a 'surprise bill.' Not a pleasant surprise; a very unpleasant surprise."