

Let's Delay No More

AB 369 will limit the abuse of step therapy by health plans **BY CYNTHIA TOUSSAINT**

SOMETIMES DELAY is good. But when it comes to pain, delay in appropriate treatment can turn short-term discomfort into a lifetime of suffering. In fact, with delay, pain can turn into a disease in and of itself. Intractable and intolerable. As studies and research mount, medical science is acknowledging that nothing good can come from making a person wait for pain relief. The March 7 edition of *Time* magazine featured a story about chronic pain with a cover that trumpeted "pain is not merely a symptom."

Unfortunately, I know this all too well.

My HMO delayed my diagnosis for 13 long years, telling me the pain was all in my head. During that time, my disease, Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, spread throughout my body and ravaged my vocal cords, leaving me bedridden for a decade and mute for five of those years. CRPS' main symptom is burning, excruciating pain that feels as though the sufferer has been doused with gasoline and lit on fire and it spreads without timely care. In my case, the delay turned my life inside out, upside down.

Part of that delay was an unethical prescription practice used by many health plans to save money. Step therapy requires patients to experiment with various prescriptions, including over-the-counter medications, before gaining access to the one originally prescribed by their physician. Oftentimes patients have to "fail" up to five times.

Step therapy has caused me to suffer withdrawal symptoms, including hallucinations, pain flares and intense anxiety. I've also experienced months of being unable to speak, doubled over in pain, while "failing" the medications my health plan put me on before finally receiving the medication my doctor originally prescribed so that I could talk and sit up again.

With my work as founder and spokesperson of For Grace, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring the ethical and equal treatment of all women in pain, I've become acutely aware of this treacherous delay tactic—and how wide spread it is throughout the country. I hear from women in pain on a daily basis. They talk to me about their

pain and the burdens brought on by their suffering, such as not being believed by their health care professionals, the abandonment of family and friends, financial ruin, experiences with depression and thoughts of suicide.

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cal history and needs of the patients."

Last year, we worked with Assemblymember Huffman on legislation that would have abolished step therapy. We got the bill through the legislative health committees before it stalled in Senate Appropriations due to cost. With this year's scaled down version, we believe there's an excellent chance to get AB 369

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that's not enough, many of these women tell me about how their health plans create obstacles as opposed to doing good. Rather than helping them find a cure, the companies prevent them from getting one. Step therapy is often alluded to by these women, but the proper term is not used because they do not understand who and what is victimizing them.

For Grace is the proud sponsor of the California Bill, AB 369, which will prohibit a health plan from requiring a patient to try and fail on more than two medications before allowing the patient to have the pain medication prescribed by their doctor. More importantly, it also allows a doctor to determine the duration of any step therapy protocol.

"AB 369 would bring California one step closer to changing practices that have resulted in higher long-term health care costs and the unnecessary physical and emotional suffering that patients endure," said Assemblymember Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael), author of AB 369.

"As a matter of health policy, Californians can no longer afford to leave issues as critical as patient care in the hands of bureaucrats and health insurance executives. We must instead place patient care back in the hands of physicians who are in the best position of knowing the medi-

signed by Governor Brown. And we plan to be a model for the rest of the country.

Health plans and insurance companies argue that they use step therapy in an attempt to drive down health care costs. Not only is this policy extremely dangerous to patient health, research has shown that step therapy can actually increase the direct cost of healthcare in the long run due to unscheduled hospital admissions, excessive use of emergency rooms, loss of employment, and loss of life itself when chronic pain patients, while waiting for relief, give up and commit suicide.

Approximately eight million Californians suffer from chronic pain, which is more than diabetes, heart disease and cancer combined and pain is the most common reason people visit their emergency rooms. The annual cost of chronic pain is estimated to be \$100 billion nation-wide, including healthcare expenses, lost income and lost productivity due to suffering.

Delays turn "Pain the Symptom" into "Pain the Disease." That's intolerable, especially when it's driven by profit and greed. Let's delay no more. Please support AB 369.

Cynthia Toussaint is the Founder and Spokesperson at For Grace. ■