

# Don't Delay

Insurer-enforced delays in getting treatment can have harmful—and even deadly—consequences **BY CYNTHIA TOUSSAINT**

**A**NY DELAY in health care is bad, but for pain patients, delay can mean the difference between a few days or weeks of discomfort versus a lifetime wracked by the physical torture and psychological despair that accompanies chronic pain.

I know.

My HMO delayed my diagnosis for 13 long years, saying for the most part that the pain I experienced was all in my head. During that time, my disease, Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, spread throughout my entire body and ravaged my vocal chords, leaving me bedridden for a decade and unable to speak for five of those years. CRPS' main symptom is burning, excruciating pain, which makes the sufferer feel as though they have been doused with gasoline and lit on fire. In my case, delay in care turned my life inside out and upside down. That delay also cost me a cure.

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 became aware of a delay tactic used by health insurance companies to save money at the cost of pain patients. Because of my experience, I had to take action to be certain others with pain wouldn't suffer the delay in care I did.

For Grace is the proud sponsor of the California Bill, AB 1826, that will abolish the unethical practice used by insurance companies known as "step therapy" (nicknamed "fail first") that passed the Assembly in June and is winding its way to the Governor's desk.

Step therapy is a policy used by many health plans that 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 before they are finally given the prescription their doctor originally prescribed.

"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," said Assemblymember Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael), author of AB 1826. "We must instead place patient care back in the hands of physicians who are in the best position of knowing the medical history and needs of the patients."

"Doctors prescribe specific medications because they have the expertise to decide what treatments will help their patients the most. Insurance companies shouldn't be allowed to second-guess doctors and compromise patient care. Prohibiting the

practice of step therapy will ensure that patients receive the care they need," said Assemblymember Mike Feuer (D-Los Angeles), who is a joint-author of the bill.

While Californians with pain continue to suffer due to delay, insurance companies are using them as guinea pigs. AB 1826 would put an end to patients being forced to endure weeks, even years, of unnecessary pain, inappropriate treatments and increased health care costs. Californians must be aware of these issues and speak out to help prevent short-term pain sufferers from developing into intractable patients.

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 health care 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 commit suicide.

Approximately 76 million Americans suffer from pain, which is more than those with diabetes, heart disease and cancer combined. The annual cost of chronic pain is estimated to be \$100 billion nation-wide, including health care expenses, lost income and lost productivity due to suffering.

Any kind of pain and suffering is intolerable, especially the kind that is caused by greed. Let's delay no longer. Please support AB 1826.

*Cynthia Toussaint is the Founder and Spokesperson of For Grace, [www.forgrace.org](http://www.forgrace.org).* ■

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