Readers respond to tale of $89,000 snake bite

Karen Garloch Staff Writer

My recent column about the $89,000 hospital bill for a snake bite stirred interest worldwide. It was picked up by Yahoo, The Huffington Post, Time and a lot of other websites I've never heard of. And it generated many comments both online and through email.

"After hearing about the $89,000 hospital bill for a snake bite, I should feel better about the $125,000 price tag of rabies vaccine for a family of four (2 adults, an 8-year-old and a 2-year-old)," wrote Alex Bass, a Rutherford County lawyer.

He was responding to the story of Eric Ferguson's bill from Lake Norman Regional **Medical** Center in Mooresville. Because Ferguson, 54, of Mooresville, has health insurance, his bill was discounted to about $20,000, of which he paid $5,400 out-of-pocket. Although pleased with his treatment, he was still upset that the hospital charged so much initially and got paid so much even after the discount.

Sending **bills** with charges that seem unrelated to anything is the modus operandi for U.S. hospitals, and it doesn't make sense to anybody.

'Something really wrong'

Another reader wrote to say he was "wholly unsurprised by the charges."

The Charlotte man, who asked not to be named, said he and his wife took their 2-year-old son to an outpatient surgery center last year to have tubes put in his ears because of frequent infections. The procedure took about 12 minutes, he said. The initial hospital bill was $23,000.

As in Ferguson's case, the bill was discounted to a smaller "allowable" amount based on the insurer's contract. "The sad thing was they were able to clean out our HRA (health reimbursement account)," the reader wrote. ".We refused to pay any more. They got thousands from us."

More recently, he said he was quoted $45,000 by a Charlotte-area outpatient center for minor eye surgery. "There is something really wrong with this."

While I didn't spend as much time checking on his story as I did Ferguson's, it's similar to many I've heard over the years. Hospitals often can't tell you how much a procedure will cost before you have it, and afterward, it's hard to make sense of the **bills** you get. Charges for similar procedures vary widely from region to region. A good dose of price transparency could help us all become better consumers.

Jumper cables for a snake bite?

Some responses to the column were unrelated to the cost of care. Darrell Atkinson from Lawton, Okla., sent me a story about an unusual treatment for snake bites that he claims worked for his dog, Ginger. When Ginger was bitten by a snake, Atkinson said he took her to his veterinarian, along with an article he'd read on "how to treat snake bites with small electrical charges."

Several hours later, Atkinson wrote, the vet called and said he "felt like an idiot," but he took the dog and an assistant out to his pickup truck and followed the instructions in the article. "He hooked jumper cables to the battery in his pickup and put two screwdrivers in the other ends. He then shocked my dog around the site of the bite. He said that she never had any swelling or loss of appetite and I could pick her up after work," Atkinson wrote.

Atkinson said the now-retired vet told him that he and his fellow bird hunters always lost a lot of dogs to snake bites during their hunting trips, but since he learned about the shock treatment, they hadn't lost one.

I found many online references to this "treatment," which was reported by a **medical** missionary in the British journal Lancet.

But an article at herper.com (a website about herpetology, the study of reptiles and amphibians) dismisses the treatment as ineffective and possibly dangerous, not to mention painful. (Ginger could not be reached for comment.)

The snake bite column also prompted another question unrelated to the size of the bill: What kind of snake?

Ferguson said it was a copperhead.

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Eric Ferguson of Mooresville was bitten by a copperhead.