

Legislative panel looks over pain management fees

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Patients and doctors accuse insurers and employers of being short-sighted about paying for pain management.

And they had sympathetic ears in members of a legislative panel that met Oct. 10 in Livonia.

"I understand Michigan is one of the worst states to get treatment for chronic pain," said Charise Copeland, a Plymouth resident who 15 years ago suffered a severe neck injury and broken facial bones, has undergone 14 neck operations and has been to every doctor at several hospitals.

"The majority of my life I spend crying in bed. You want help. You don't want to fight with insurance companies," she told Rep. Gerald Law, R-Plymouth, and members of a House Health Policy subcommittee.

But fighting with insurance companies is precisely what many patients say they do. Insurers and employers, represented by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, don't want to pay to send them to regional centers that specialize in pain management, such as Dr. Joel Saper's in Ann Arbor or St. Mary Hospital's in Livonia.

Lobbyist Nancy McKeague, writing in the Michigan Chamber's magazine, argued that a Law bill "has the potential to be the most costly of the myriad of mandated benefit bills." McKeague also dislikes including pain management reimbursement as a worker's comp medical benefit.

Law replied that the chamber is looking at it wrong. "Business doesn't take into account the lost time and lost productivity (of ailing workers). Nancy glosses over this. Are people supposed to just take Tylenol and try to work?" Law said in an interview.

No insurers or businesses testified in the 75-minute session.

Law and committee chair John Jamian, R-Bloomfield Township, see pain management as an alternative to the kind of relief given by Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the assisted suicide specialist.

Witnesses gave Law plenty of ammunition. They supported his arguments that insurers' failure to cover specialized pain management results in 1) squandering money on pills that don't work and doctors who can't help and 2) losing time from the job. Samples:

• LeeAnn Stotts, Interlochen nurse with a painful bladder disease: "Insurance companies don't want to pay for measures to alleviate pain. They cost money. Yet one hears or reads in the news too often that someone has ended his or her life to escape pain."

• Insurers and employers should realize that if a physician recommends an intrathecal (Morphine) pump or a spinal cord nerve stimulator for a patient, the patient's pain may decrease or cease. He or she may be able to return to the work force, pay taxes and purchase consumer goods. . . . That's just the practical advantage. Think of the emotional burden that is lifted!"

• Gar Schumacher, Ann Arbor resident and former menial health worker who was hit in the head by a baseball hat five years ago: "I used all my sick time and annual time. I lost my job. I lost my fiancé. I've been on 40 different medications. I spent \$1,500 out of my own pocket. I don't

have anything."

• Timothy Kinder, Whittaker, suffering from head pains and high blood pressure: "I went seven days to the emergency room for pains in the head. . . . They gave me a bagful of drugs. They won't prescribe the Denadol because it's addictive - narcotic."

"I'm part of a HMO (health maintenance organization) so I couldn't go to Dr. Saper's clinic. Finally, after 90 days I was demoted. I make \$10,000 less. They wasted gobs of money on these bags of drugs that didn't help me."

• Dr. Joel Saper, Ann Arbor,

member of the Michigan Council on Pain and head of a regional pain management clinic: "Not every doctor can deal with trauma or pain. Advanced care centers are in the public good. Critics say the costs are exorbitant. We need to look at how much mismanagement of pain is costing government and business."

Saper quoted a national expert who said that 80 percent of 23 million back surgeries performed each year are unnecessary. "This bill will channel high-cost patients to the most advanced centers of care. This bill will save money."

• Dr. Timothy A. Wright, med-

ical director of the pain management center at St. Mary Hospital in Livonia: "I'm in favor of the bills overall. They are long overdue. The spirit of the bills is to open up services for pain patients."

"My concern is that it requires research on pain management and publishing once a year. Without much staff, and seeing patients every day, that might be difficult."

The bill package

The subcommittee plans hearings Oct. 29 in Grand Rapids and another in Lansing on these bills:

• House Bill 5944 (sponsored by Law) defines "intractable pain" as severe, persistent recurring pain that is disabling. Defines "center for advanced care" as an accredited facility with a medical director certified in pain medicine. (This is the central bill to which the others are attached, or "tie-burred.")

• HB 5939 (sponsored by Rep. Penny Crissman, R-Rochester) would amend the public health code to recognize that treatment of intractable pain requires coverage under health care contracts and insurance policies; it says controlled substances may need to be used to control intractable pain.

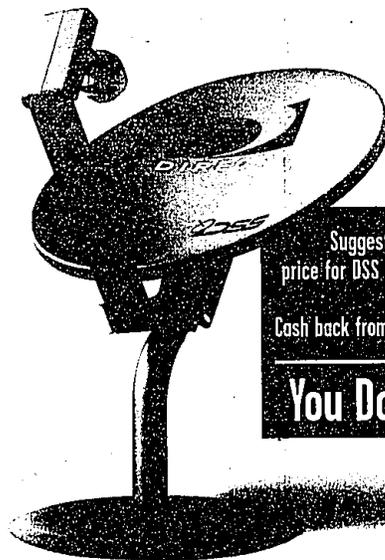
• HB 5940 (Rep. Michael Griffin, D-Jackson) requires a physician to advise a patient to consider being referred to a center for advanced care when diagnosed with intractable pain.

• HB 5941-43 (Crissman, Kirk Profit, D-Ypsilanti, and Beverly Hammerstrom, R-Temperance) requires insurers to provide coverage of intractable pain at specialized centers of pain management. Multiple bills are needed to cover commercial insurers, HMOs and the Blues.

Refer to HB 5939-44 when writing to your state representative, State Capitol, Lansing 48909.

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LWV hosts call-in forum

The League of Women Voters-Oakland Area will sponsor a live call-in forum from 7:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 17, for individuals wishing to ask questions of 8th Circuit Court candidates Nanci Grant and John N. O'Brien. The show will air on channel 11, the local origination

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channel. Questions can be called in to Continental Cable offices thirty minutes before the start of the show or any time during the show at (810) 353-4106 or (810) 383-4105. League volunteers will screen the questions.

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