

A Hospital's 'E/M Add-On' Turned Me Into a Radical

An indecipherable email about my mother-in-law's checkup has me reaching for the pitchfork.

By: [Matthew Hennessey](#) Oct. 21, 2025 4:23 pm ET

'How do you come up with things to write about?' a young George Will once asked William F. Buckley Jr. That's easy, said the National Review founder, "the world irritates me three times a week." Most people seek to avoid the feeling of irritation. But for newspaper guys, irritation equals inspiration.

Let me tell you an irritating little story that I think you will find relatable. It's about my mother-in-law. She's 86 and has been ill for a while. For the past few years, she's lived in a nursing home in a rural part of the Northeast. The facility provides her with long-term care for memory loss and other chronic issues. The nursing home staff are generally competent and responsive, though there tends to be a lot of turnover. I gather that's common.

As part of my mother-in-law's care, a member of the nursing home staff takes her to regular appointments at a clinic on the campus of a large medical center about 30 miles away. The clinic and medical center are affiliated with a prestigious nearby university. You would recognize the name. I'm being vague because I'm not trying to get anyone in trouble. My irritation is with the whole system's attitude, not any one person's.

Recently my mother-in-law went for her annual checkup. She wasn't complaining of any particular problems or in need of any new medications. In the healthcare and insurance lingo we've all been forced to learn and use in recent years, this was a "well visit." Routine. Well visits are typically covered—even encouraged—by insurance providers at no cost to the patient. My mother-in-law has Medicare.

When the bill for the well visit came, my wife, who is her mother's legal guardian, noticed two unfamiliar charges. One was a \$150 "facility" fee. The other, for \$40, was itemized as the "Evaluation and Management (E/M) add-on." Almost \$200 tacked on to a bill for a well visit. My wife isn't one to tolerate being nickel-and-dimed. She wrote a polite note to the clinic inquiring as to the nature and purpose of the charges.

Its reply is what irritated me.

"The 'Evaluation and Management (E/M)' add-on is used to account for the complexity of E/M services that serve as the continuing focal point for all needed health care services or with

medical care services that are part of ongoing care related to a patient's single, serious condition, or a complex condition."

Verbatim. Because I work with words for a living, I am hard-wired to try to untangle sentences like this. My brain immediately begins breaking down the parts and reassembling them in a way that a person moderately familiar with the English language might find decipherable. I defy you to tell me what this blithering piffle actually means.

Naturally, there was more piffle, and it, too, blithered: "The complexity captured by The Evaluation and Management add-on is not in the clinical condition itself but in the cognitive load and the continued responsibility of being the focal point for all needed services for the patient. It emphasizes the importance of the longitudinal relationship between the practitioner and the patient in the diagnosis and treatment plan."

Best I can tell, my mother-in-law's well visit—which produced no change in the care plan and no new diagnoses or prescriptions—cost an extra \$200 because . . . well, just because. If, like my wife, you find that frustrating and unsatisfactory, the brand-name medical center offers you a pile of word jerky to chew on while you get your checkbook out.

Imagine if your dry cleaner treated you this way. How quickly would you take your business to his competitor across the street? But as we all know, healthcare and insurance don't operate like normal businesses do. It's nothing but buck-passing middlemen in league with penny-pinching hospital executives. When there's trouble, they all point the finger at big government, which points it right back at them.

Healthcare is a diseased sector of our economy where the prices are intentionally obscured, and the customer is never right.

A fun game to play is to ask your most politically doctrinaire friends if there's a policy, they secretly support that cuts against their usual views. I'm a free-market guy. You can look it up. But my increasing irritation with the American healthcare system could make me grab a pitchfork before too long. Another email like that and I might join the movement to tear it all down. Getting nickel-and-dimed is one thing. Getting treated like an idiot is something else. Constant exposure to jargon and deflection turns ordinary people into radicals. American healthcare is complex, I know. But everyone involved—from politicians and policymakers to hospital administrators, insurance companies, physicians and nursing-home staff—should understand that ordinary people all across this country have had just about enough.

Writers need not worry about what comes next for healthcare in this country. Whatever it is will offer plenty to irritate us. We have nothing to lose but the Evaluation and Management add-on.