

UW-Madison: UW's Abernethy named to federal Department of Transportation committee

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Contact: Andrew Hellpap
(608) 316-9786
ahellpap@uwhealth.org

MADISON, Wis. – A UW-Madison professor has been named to a new federal Air Ambulance and Patient Billing (AAPB) Advisory Committee.

Dr. Michael Abernethy, clinical professor of emergency medicine at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, and UW Health emergency physician, will serve as the physician consultant to the United States Department of Transportation advisory committee.

This committee will review options to improve the disclosure of charges and fees for air medical services and better inform consumers of insurance options for such services.

One of the main goals is to address the practice of balance billing, according to the committee's application announcement. Balance, or extra, billing is when a health-care provider charges a patient for the difference between what insurance pays and what the provider charges.

Balance billing takes place in other health care sectors, but it is far more common and inflated when it comes to the for-profit air ambulance industry, according to Abernethy.

"I have closely monitored the changes in the air-ambulance industry over the last

three decades,” he said. “It went from a local hospital-based system to one that is largely owned and operated by a few international equity firms, and there are serious problems with the current structure and delivery of this vital service.”

The federal committee consists of the Secretaries of Transportation and Health and Human Services; representatives from each relevant federal agency; state insurance regulators; health insurance providers; patient advocacy groups; a physician specializing in emergency, trauma, cardiac or stroke; three representatives from the air ambulance industry; and three representatives determined by the secretary of transportation who are not from the previously mentioned groups.

Once the committee convenes, it will have six months to issue a final report containing recommendations regarding disclosure of charges and fees for air ambulance services and insurance coverage, consumer protection and enforcement authorities of both the Department of Transportation and state authorities, and the prevention of balance billing to consumers. The report will be submitted to the Secretary of Transportation, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the appropriate committees of Congress. The Department of Transportation is obligated to consider rulemaking in order to implement the committee’s recommendations.