

# Gordon Lang: Protect Wisconsin patients and doctors on the frontlines of COVID-19

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Across Wisconsin, doctors are fighting on the frontlines and risking their own health to treat vulnerable patients suffering from Coronavirus. Big insurance companies promised that they would waive co-pays and certain fees to test for the virus. But here in Wisconsin, insurers are still sending surprise medical bills to patients and making it harder for doctors to do their jobs.

Wisconsinites have borne much of the brunt of hefty surprise medical bills. The median household income in Wisconsin is under \$60,000, meaning that one unexpected bill for thousands of dollars not covered by an insurer can forever change the lives of many patients. In some cases, patients face liens on their homes and have had their wages garnished. Many drown under the heavy weight of debt, sinking them into deep depths of financial ruin. Surprise medical bills have become one of the leading causes of bankruptcy in our state.

One Wisconsin family received a \$3,000 bill after their insurer refused to cover a routine blood test for their three-year-old daughter at a local children's hospital. The child's mother said that she "was in shock" when she received the large bill. Their unfortunate experience has sadly become routine for others across not only our state, but the nation as well.

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Americans lately have even been hit with surprise bills after testing and medical

care related to coronavirus. But patients are not alone in facing the physical and financial pain of this pandemic. Medical first responders, who staff emergency rooms nationwide, are under immense stress. They have to quarantine away from their families and work around the clock to treat as many patients as possible to help quell the outbreak of the virus. Many doctors have even canceled elective surgeries and routine checkups to devote their full time towards ending this pandemic.

Last month Congress passed a Coronavirus relief package to help support Main Street America. But doctors also need strong support from Congress in the next coronavirus relief bill to continue to be able to treat a large number of patients. Anything that prevents them from doing that would interfere with our recovery from this viral disease.

Government rate setting, for example, would cause hospitals in rural areas of the country to close. Already, we have lost 170 medical facilities nationwide in the past 15 years. Now, patients and doctors are worried that the coronavirus pandemic could cause even more hospitals to disappear and shrink access to critical medical care.

To help doctors battle this unprecedented health crisis, our leaders in Washington have to support our healthcare providers in the next round of coronavirus relief funding. Doctors will not be able to treat as many sick patients without financial relief from Congress. First responders need assistance amid this pandemic, and with crowded hospitals due to the virus, patients need as many health care providers as possible—not fewer.

Fortunately, President Trump has promised to support our doctors on the front lines. With support from the President and leaders in Congress, such as House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, medical professionals would get the relief and help they need in the battle against coronavirus. Now is the time to put politics aside and form a united front to protect doctors and patients.

— *Lang is a retired pathologist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*