

PEN's Insurance Pulse 2017

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Get Out of Jail Free—This Time

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It's hard to imagine that \$86 almost cost us our health insurance and resulted in financial hardship. But our story shows how careful you must be when dealing with health insurance. One slipup can almost ruin you, financially and medically. We want to ensure that no other family with bleeding disorders has to go through what we did. Thankfully, our story had a happy ending.

In mid-February 2016, I was notified by University of Kentucky HealthCare Hemophilia Treatment Center (UKHTC) about a billing issue with two shipments of factor from January and February of 2016. UKHTC (our factor provider and medical provider) informed us that reimbursement for the two shipments of factor was being rejected by Anthem, our insurance company, due to termination of my policy. *Termination?* I had already paid my premiums for January, and I was getting ready to pay February's premium. What had happened?

I reviewed my notes and my memory to get the most accurate account. In late December 2015, I had called Anthem to add my wife Elaine to my insurance policy. I'd spoken with a representative, whose name I documented (though I didn't document the call's recording number). She added Elaine, which increased my monthly premium for December. I paid the December balance over the phone, and I recall asking the rep at least twice what my new monthly balance would be. She told me \$530 and some change. So I went ahead and also paid the January 2016 premium over the phone, \$530, and thought it was taken care of.

In the first week of January, I received a bill for an odd amount, \$86. I had no clue what this was for. Under the amount was a statement like "Please disregard if you have already sent your payment." No big deal, I thought to myself. I had just paid the January premium of \$530. I even checked my bank account to ensure that the payment had gone through. I assumed the \$86 invoice must have been an error. I didn't give it another thought. Big mistake!

In the first week of February, I received my monthly insurance bill, which showed the amount due was higher than \$530. At that time we were struggling financially, and I waited until the middle or later part of the month to pay my premium, knowing that I had a 31-day grace period. When I called Anthem to set up an over-the-phone payment, I was informed that my policy had been canceled because I hadn't paid the premium in full in January. I felt confused, then frustrated. What had happened, and how could I fix it?

I told the Anthem rep about my January payment of \$530. She said that wasn't the correct amount. Apparently, our monthly premium had increased to \$616 in January 2016! So I owed \$86 for January, and because it hadn't been paid by the end of the grace period (beginning of February), my policy had been terminated.

I told the rep about my previous phone call with Anthem, adding my wife to the policy, and the monthly quote I was given. She determined that the quote was correct—for 2015! It did not take into account the premium increase for 2016. *Really?* She asked why I had not responded to the January bill. I told her the bill had said to disregard if I had already paid. I asked to hear the recording of the initial call. But I hadn't documented the recording number, and she couldn't track it down. We'll never know if I misunderstood the initial quote, or if I received wrong information.

In the meantime, I applied for reinstatement to Anthem, but this was denied. I called our HTC social worker, Julia Kluesner. Julia helped me appeal the case before Anthem, but the appeal was denied.

By then, I had already received my January and February factor shipments from the UKHTC pharmacy—before I ever knew about the insurance problem! The HTC worried that if my insurance weren't reinstated, I would eventually be billed for the factor, to the tune of \$63,000. This had become a serious issue with an uncertain outcome.

Now the questions began: Who's responsible for paying the outstanding bill of \$63,000 for the factor shipped? Me? The UKHTC pharmacy always confirms coverage with Anthem before any shipment can occur. How could I have received the factor if I wasn't covered? How do I get my insurance coverage back, with enrollment only once a year? How do I order factor for March?

This was potentially devastating financially for my family. I couldn't pay the \$63,000 or pay to fight a legal battle. I'm a self-employed, first-generation farmer. In the last two years, the US farm economy has tanked from low commodity prices. Our farm operation has seen a lot of red ink. It has been a struggle to keep our heads above water.

I went through March with no healthcare coverage, surviving only on donated factor through our factor manufacturer's compassionate care program. Then Elaine was promoted to full time at her work, enabling us both to have coverage in April. This was an absolute blessing!

I reached out to the hemophilia community for advice. My mother contacted Laurie Kelley, who was on the case immediately. Laurie put me in touch with an insurance expert at National Hemophilia Foundation. I continued speaking with Julia, who was extremely helpful as well. And I talked with our attorney and my uncle, Bob Massie.

We basically had to fight Anthem to get the factor covered, or work with UKHTC in negotiating the bill. Elaine and I weighed the possible outcomes. I felt I had a legitimate case with Anthem. But I worried that I had made a mistake or misunderstood something, and would still be responsible for the bill, plus legal fees. On the other hand, I certainly didn't want to saddle the HTC with our bill.

Eventually, the UKHTC pharmacy billed me \$63,000 for the factor, but we negotiated the bill to \$0. How? We had a loss from farming on our tax return, which allowed us to have the bill erased. We're thankful that the issue was settled, but I didn't like having the UKHTC pharmacy pay the bill. I wish we'd gotten Anthem to reimburse the HTC, and I think there was a legitimate case for Anthem to pay our claim.

Now, I watch like a hawk anything and everything insurance or medical related. We were given our “get out of jail free” card, and I don’t want to be in that situation again. My message to everyone else in our community: 1. Document every call you have with insurance companies, and get every number or code. 2. Check all bills and read all letters and policies, monthly. 3. Engage your HTC to help you with insurance claims. In this age of healthcare uncertainty, it’s more important than ever to safeguard your policy, services, and factor supply by reading, asking, and challenging the system.

Ian Thomas has severe hemophilia A, and lives in Kentucky with his wife Elaine and their new baby boy, True. Ian is a first-generation farmer, raising cattle and crops on 750 acres. Ian and Elaine work for a crop insurance agency in Kentucky, and are passionate about agriculture and rural life. They’re active in the Episcopal Church and local community, serving on boards of several organizations. Ian’s grandparents are Robert K. and Susanne Massie, authors of Journey, a book about the life of Ian’s well-known uncle, Bob Massie, who was cured of hemophilia following a liver transplant.