

# Costs of a Hysterectomy, Then and Now

Craig J. Cantoni

My wife recently rummaged through family keepsakes and found bills for an emergency hysterectomy that her grandmother had in 1944, at St. Francis Hospital in Olean, N.Y., in the southwestern part of the state. She was transported 20 miles by ambulance from her rural home outside of Bradford, Pa.

Below, in rounded numbers, is what she was charged for the ambulance, the hospital stay, the operating room, the anesthetic, six transfusions, and drugs. A bill for the surgeon was not included, and could not be found among the old bills.

|                  | Cost in<br>1944 Dollars | Cost in<br>2022 Dollars |
|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Ambulance        | \$20                    | \$326                   |
| 32 Days Hospital | \$178                   | \$2,907                 |
| 6 Transfusions   | \$120                   | \$1,960                 |
| Operating Room   | \$15                    | \$245                   |
| Anesthetic       | \$10                    | \$163                   |
| Drugs            | \$15                    | \$236                   |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>\$358</b>            | <b>\$5,837</b>          |

Given that she was hospitalized for 32 days, there must have been complications. It's not known what kind of hysterectomy she had, but I'll assume for the purposes of this commentary that it was an abdominal hysterectomy, which is the most complicated kind.

I was struck by how short and easily understandable the bills were: no copays, no deductibles, no insurance gibberish, no hidden charges, no cost-shifting from those with insurance to those without. The final bill consisted of several entries on a 4x6-inch piece of paper.

It's difficult to compare these with today's costs because there are so many variables. But some ballpark figures can give us an idea of how they compare.

Today, the cost of an average inpatient hospital stay *per day* is \$2,607.<sup>1</sup> That's about what my wife's grandmother paid for 32 *days* in a hospital, in constant dollars.

Patients usually remain in hospital after abdominal hysterectomies. The length of time has been decreasing recently and now may be as short as one to two days.<sup>2</sup>

Patients are released from the hospital sooner now than in 1944, for recuperation at home. I'm not qualified to say whether that's bad or good. However, my wife's grandmother and her husband lived in a tiny bungalow heated by a wood-burning stove. The husband left the house early in the morning and returned in the evening, on his job working alone as a pump hand for Kendall Oil in the surrounding forest. Although these immigrants were hardy folks, it would've been difficult for Grandma to be left alone to recuperate.

According to HealthcareBlueBook.com, the average cost today for an abdominal hysterectomy is \$15,321.<sup>3</sup> It's not clear what that includes.

Another source says that "the total cost for hysterectomy surgery depends on a lot of factors such as the anesthetic fee, private hospital fee, private operating facility fee, the extent of surgery required. The average cost was \$43,622 for abdominal, \$31,934 for vaginal, \$38,312 for laparoscopic, and \$49,526 for robotic hysterectomies."<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the variables and whatever the source, it seems clear that hospital and medical costs are considerably higher today.

Of course, costs today include the cost of expensive technology, and survival rates have no doubt improved tremendously. On the other hand, one would have expected technology and efficiencies of scale to have improved productivity, increased efficiency, and kept costs in check.

At the risk of starting a war between left- and right-leaning economists and health policy wonks, perhaps costs were lower in 1944 because patients paid the charges out of their own pocket. In other words, there was a true consumer market instead of the Rube Goldberg-like contraption that exists today.

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## REFERENCES

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