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To the Editor:

This weekend's profile of WellPoint CEO Angela Braly, "A Wasted Opportunity" (Rago, 2/7), does disservice to the women and men who work in America's hospitals as well as the communities they serve.

As the nation's second largest insurer, WellPoint earned \$2.7 billion in the last three months of 2009; a nice vantage point for pointing fingers in the health spending blame game. America's hospitals would rather be part of constructive solutions than playing games. Mrs. Braly's assertion that hospital "inefficiencies", "arbitrary pricing" and "disinterest" in making health care affordable are at the root of America's rising health bill is offensive and ignores the facts.

Eliminating Inefficiencies - Helping patients manage chronic diseases such as diabetes keeps them healthy and out of the hospital. That's why thousands of hospitals have diabetes management programs, working diligently to enroll, teach and engage members of the community living with diabetes.

Today, every hour of emergency room care requires an hour of paperwork imposed by government and commercial payers. Hospitals face duplicative regulations and a myriad of insurance plans, each with different claims processing and record-keeping requirements. This unnecessary complexity adds billions to the health care tab. That's why hospitals are leading the charge to eliminate unnecessary, administrative burdens that take caregivers away from their primary mission.

Fighting for Resources - Medicare and Medicaid tell hospitals – and physicians for that matter – how much they'll be paid caring for the most fragile Americans. Insurers, particularly large ones such as Mrs. Braly's company, have the market muscle to "set" prices for procedures. Hospitals are left to negotiate as best they can but are frequently told "take it or leave it – we won't negotiate."



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While one hospital provides costly burn unit services, a neighboring hospital may serve a disproportionate share of Medicaid patients. Both hospitals lose money on life-saving procedures and the essential public services their community depends upon. For example, federal health programs payouts average more than \$32 billion below the cost of caring for patients covered by those programs. And it is hospitals that provide the safety net to the 50 million uninsured in this country. To allege that hospitals are arbitrarily driving health costs up is just plain wrong.

Making Health Care Affordable - There are many factors that drive up the cost of health care – an aging population, the need for increasingly sophisticated technology and facilities, as well as millions of Americans living with chronic disease.

Yet day in and day out, patients find open doors and a promise of healing in hospitals across the country. Faced with mounting financial challenges, busier emergency departments and increasing numbers of individuals denied insurance coverage thus increasing the cost of care for us all, the women and men in America's hospitals provide care when it's needed, where it's needed.

Our health care system is at a crossroads. Improving the affordability of care will take an effort by everyone – insurers, hospitals, businesses, physicians, nurses, employers and individuals. Hospitals are committed to doing what it takes. Too bad Mrs. Braly would rather point fingers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rich Umbdenstock". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rich Umbdenstock
President and CEO