

The Columbus Dispatch

Scammers trick seniors with 'free' medical devices, then bill Medicare

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Nancy DeLozier looked at the array of medical equipment on the floor of her living room and called it junk.

The 84-year-old Northwest Side woman said she received the items in the mail but neither wants nor needs them.

One shipment, from February 2017, included a back brace and knee braces. A second shipment, which arrived this May, held ankle and wrist braces and another designed to support the shoulder, elbow, hand and wrist. They were ordered by out-of-state doctors whom DeLozier had not heard of, communicated with or met.

Medicare, the taxpayer-funded federal health care program for seniors, paid more than \$3,800 for the items, which would have sat unused in a shipping box if they hadn't been discovered by her daughter Cathy Bell.

Anne Fredrickson, who advocates for Medicare recipients in Ohio, said telemarketers call seniors asking about their pain. And if they get an affirmative response, the devices are sent and billed to Medicare.

"It's one of the biggest scams going on all over the country right now," said Fredrickson, who manages the Ohio Senior Medicare Patrol program at the Cincinnati-based Pro Seniors. "We get a call about every week from someone that's being solicited."

The practice is so prevalent that the program released a video about it in May.

Bell is livid, and has spent hours making countless phone calls to unravel how the devices came to her mother's door. She has been able to get about \$1,200 returned to Medicare.

Bell said she complained to government agencies, called the medical device suppliers listed on her mother's Medicare claims and talked to one of the prescribing physicians, Dr. Christopher Southwick of Kansas Pain and Wellness in Topeka, Kansas.

Reached by The Dispatch, Southwick said he bases his prescriptions on information received from the callers who talk to patients. He did not know who makes the calls, but said the company RediDoc serves as a middleman.

Southwick, whose online biography indicates that he is licensed to practice in nine states

including Ohio, said he does the service as a way to branch out amid cutbacks.

The work is done truthfully, honestly and without looking to hurt anyone, Southwick said. Some people who receive equipment, he said, might develop buyer's remorse or forget they made the request.

On its website, RediDoc is described as a service that connects patients with physicians for medical consultations via telephone, video and email. A phone message left for an executive there was not returned.

Messages left for the medical device suppliers listed on DeLozier's claims also were not returned.

Bell said that, through her calls, she was played recordings of her mother talking with telemarketers. She said she felt like her mother was badgered in one and, in the other, seemed confused and unsure of what the caller was talking about.

In a statement, the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services said it takes allegations of fraud, waste and abuse seriously and has imposed guidelines to limit the ability of providers and suppliers to market equipment and supplies directly to people with Medicare.

"These marketing guidelines prohibit unsolicited direct contact with beneficiaries," the statement said. "CMS may take action against suppliers that do not comply with these guidelines."

Audits are conducted on medical-equipment claims that are deemed high risk by the insurers that process them.

At the State Medical Board of Ohio, any complaints or investigations would be confidential, spokeswoman Tessie Pollock said.

If the board cannot take action on a fraud complaint, she said, it can share information with law enforcement, Medicare, Medicaid and other state regulatory boards.

Jill Del Greco, a spokeswoman for Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, said Medicare complaints are received and referred to federal investigators.

"This is just another type of scam that we have seen where, in one way or another, someone gets a hold of a patient's information and contacts them and ends up charging Medicare or Medicaid for medically unnecessary equipment," Del Greco said.

Fredrickson of Pro Seniors said that Ohio Senior Medicare Patrol also sends complaints to federal authorities in an effort to reduce the \$60 billion to \$90 billion in Medicare funds lost to fraud annually.

Some of the devices, billed at \$1,000 to Medicare at times, are available on Amazon for about \$20, she said. Another concern is that if a patient legitimately needs a medical device, Medicare could deny payment if it recently paid for a similar item.

Bell said she feels her mother was taken advantage of and harassed. DeLozier was in tears about the shipments, she said, and was embarrassed and felt like "an idiot," like she had done something wrong.

"I just think it's incredibly wrong, just on a moral level," Bell said. "I'd like to have Medicare benefits when I need it. Medicare is in trouble, and this is just adding to the problem."

For tips on avoiding Medicare fraud and help filing complaints, call 513-345-4160 or 1-800-488-6070 or visit <http://www.proseniors.org/ohio-smp/protect-yourself/>.

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