Available Data Show Privately-Insured Patients Are at Financial Risk

What GAO Found

Privately-insured patients transported by air ambulance providers outside of their insurers’ provider networks are at financial risk for balance bills—which, as the figure shows, are for the difference between prices charged by providers and payments by insurers. Any balance bills are in addition to copayments or other types of cost-sharing typically paid by patients under their insurance coverage.

Potential for Balance Billing of Privately-Insured Patients for Air Ambulance Transports

According to GAO’s analysis of the most complete data identified for air ambulance transports of privately-insured patients, 69 percent of about 20,700 transports in the data set were out-of-network in 2017. This is higher than what research shows for ground ambulance transports (51 percent in 2014 according to one study) and other emergency services. Air ambulance providers that GAO spoke with reported entering into more network contracts recently, which could lower the extent of out-of-network transports in areas covered by the contracts.

While out-of-network transports may result in balance billing, the data GAO analyzed do not indicate the extent to which patients received balance bills and, if so, the size of the bills. In addition, as GAO reported in 2017, there is a lack of national data on balance billing, but some states have attempted to collect information from patients. For example, GAO reviewed over 60 consumer complaints received by two of GAO’s selected states—the only states able to provide information on the amount of individual balance bills—and all but one complaint was for a balance bill over $10,000. Patients may not end up paying the full amount if they reach agreements with air ambulance providers, insurers, or both. The amounts of potential balance bills are informed in part by the prices charged. GAO’s analysis of the data set with transports for privately-insured patients found the median price charged by air ambulance providers was about $36,400 for a helicopter transport and $40,600 for a fixed-wing transport in 2017.

The six states reviewed by GAO and others have attempted to limit potential balance billing. For example, the six states have taken actions to regulate insurers, generate public attention, or both. As required by recent federal law, the Secretary of Transportation has taken steps to form an advisory committee to, among other things, recommend options to prevent instances of balance billing.