Too many lives hinge on drug prices

Letter to the Editor:

The protests around the 2016 Mylan EpiPen scandal brought into focus the perils for patients when the price of a life-saving drug spikes, with little or no forewarning, and no ready alternative.

As a Type 1 diabetic who has been dealing with escalating insulin prices, I was heartened to see the outcry over our country’s attitude toward setting affordable drug pricing policies. My concern is that without more crises to capture the public’s attention, the issue will recede in significance.

Diabetics, like me, are required to inject daily doses of insulin to sustain our lives. Insulin is a simple hormone that now costs about $350 a bottle. When I was a newly diagnosed child in the 1970s, insulin cost $1.49 a bottle. The price rose slowly over the years: $20 in the 1990s, $75 in the 2000s. Suddenly, very recently, the price skyrocketed. Almost 50% of my cost of insulin has been incurred in the last four years. For some diabetics, the price is so high that they simply cannot afford to buy it.

In fact, prices have become so steep that within diabetic communities, we distribute extra insulin to those in need at no cost. I also know diabetics who get their insulin in Canada or other countries at incredible savings without a prescription. Any death from lack of insulin is unacceptable.

It simply isn’t right that in the United States — a country that is supposed to be setting the standards for advanced medical care — patients have to split pills, cross borders or crowdsource vital medication.

I have been fortunate to always have insurance so I can afford my insulin and other medical necessities, however even having insurance doesn’t make it affordable for everyone. High deductible plans force many of us to still pay a lot for our drugs.

This situation is not limited to diabetics. It might be a neighbor who has cancer or a grandparent with heart disease, or a child’s classmate with asthma. It might be you. Of all Americans, 70% take prescription drugs for a chronic condition, according to Mayo Clinic, and more than half take two. One-fifth take five prescription drugs.

We have skin in this game.

According to a recent survey by West Health Institute and NORC at the University of Chicago, 75% of Americans consider the prices of prescription drugs to be unreasonable, and despite promises from the president and members of Congress to rein in prices, very few approve of either’s handling of the issue.

This isn’t surprising given the survey found no public policy issue is more important to Americans than the high cost of health care and the rising price of prescription drugs, more so than jobs, the economy, immigration, national security and the environment.

We also know that only large-scale policy changes, not informal networks and trips to Canada, can fix this. Fully 88% of Americans say medication costs should be a priority for congressional candidates this year. And eight in 10 support proposals to allow Medicare to negotiate directly with drug manufacturers and allow generics to compete with brand-name medications. Imagine the impact if we all spoke up about it and not just when a particularly egregious story like the EpiPen debacle captures the public’s attention.

I encourage all Americans to reach out to their representatives, and candidates running for office, and tell them to make this issue a priority. Our lives are in the balance and it is time to take action.

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