



# Complex Child E-Magazine

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## Why Are So Many Home Health Companies Incompetent? How Negligent Practices Impact Our Children

Like most families of children with medical issues, we require the use of Home Health Companies for my daughter's enteral, infusion, urological, and respiratory supplies. I have been shocked over the years by how terrible our former company was, and, like many other parents, wondered how they could get away with it. I'm still not sure I know why, but after switching to a different company, I am happy to say that it does not have to be this way.

We used one well-known company for all of my daughter's needs, apart from urological supplies, until early 2008. After multiple problems with this company, we made a switch to a new company and cannot believe the difference. Unfortunately, we still need to use the old company for oxygen and respiratory supplies, as these must be delivered locally by truck.

Over the years, I have continuously seen a pattern of what can only be called abuse by some of these companies. While there are good ones out there, many of them are terrible. Here are just a few of the issues that we and other parents have encountered.

### **Incorrect Orders that Lead to Medical Problems**

Probably the most common and absolutely most frightening problem is the inability of many Home Health Companies to send out the correct items or the correct quantity of items each month. Because insurance and Medicaid often will not allow items to be sent out more than a few days in advance, these errors can lead to major medical issues when the incorrect items are sent out or an item is left out entirely.

Many of these problems involve children on specialized elemental formulas who do not receive their formulas in a timely fashion. These children, who may have severe and life-threatening allergies, depend on their specialized formulas, which cannot be purchased in stores. Without the appropriate formulas, parents must make the choice to not feed their children or to substitute a store-bought formula that may very well make their children extremely ill.

Another major issue is damaged items, such as severely dented cans of formula, sterile packages that are torn, and so forth. Getting these replaced can be a huge hassle, especially when damaged items come each month.

One problem we have had recently is receiving the correct pulse oximeter sensors for my daughter, who needs her vital signs monitored very carefully. For four months in a row, despite me specifying the exact name, model, and part number for the correct sensors, we received a different brand in neonatal size. My daughter is five! One month they even resent out the wrong ones a second time! These sensors read significantly low on my daughter, are difficult to put on a child with high tone, and are very fussy, alarming frequently. In the interim, we had to approximate readings and reuse old, decaying sensors just to try to keep on top of my daughter's very unstable vitals. I ended up buying a backup fingertip pulse oximeter on my own. Incidentally, I have still not received the sensors I want. This month they actually sent the infant/pediatric ones, but they have continued to substitute the cheaper brand, which simply does not work as well for my daughter.

There is no excuse for our children to suffer adverse health effects due to the incompetence of certain Home Health Companies. It is simply unacceptable.

### **Marking Up the Cost of Items Dramatically**

Another common problem with Home Health Agencies is the fact that they mark up the cost of products, sometimes by as much as 300%. While some of this is an insurance "game" that is played throughout the healthcare system, it is particularly egregious in a subset of healthcare that often requires lots of copays, deductibles, and other fees. Many families must pay 10-20% of each bill. Others have a set limit per year for supplies, often as low as \$1000, and must pay any amount over that limit.

We recently had an unbelievable experience with product markup, in an attempt to obtain an extra oxygen regulator after my daughter suffered a sudden-onset episode of respiratory distress. Her school really wanted to have oxygen available for her at all times. Upon calling the Home Health Company, I was told a second regulator would not be covered, but that I could rent an additional oxygen set-up for about \$300 a month out-of-pocket. This price seemed crazy to me, so I looked up the cost of regulators on the internet. The exact fancy model my daughter uses was only \$69 brand new! And a name brand one that was not as fancy was available for as little as \$37! I ended up purchasing one, despite the fact that my daughter's insurance would likely cover the item as a rental.

### **Problems with Billing and Insurance**

Billing and insurance problems are ubiquitous throughout our healthcare system, but once again, the incompetence of many of these companies leads to more problems than usual. For example, our former Home Health Company had separate divisions to bill private

insurance and Medicaid. Because of this set-up, each month I received a bill from the insurance division for 10% of the cost of items, and each month I needed to call both the insurance and Medicaid divisions to have them transfer the bill to the Medicaid division for full payment. And each month I received threatening letters stating I was late on paying my bill, which was, of course, supposed to be paid by Medicaid. This went on for two straight years!

The aforementioned example of how we had difficulty obtaining a regulator also demonstrates problems in the way some of these companies handle insurance. The respiratory company refused to attempt to precertify a regulator through insurance, stating that they knew it would be denied as an item of convenience. I asked them to submit it to Medicaid instead, but they cannot submit to Medicaid without first receiving a denial from insurance. We went round and round for quite awhile on this issue until I determined that paying the \$37 for my own regulator was way easier than wasting my time fighting this battle.

### **Poor Customer Service**

Customer service is what makes a business, and the wonderful customer service we experience with our current supplier has shown me what incompetent rudeness we really experienced with our former company. Besides getting orders completely wrong, being impolite, and being completely unhelpful, poor customer service can lead to medical complications that are simply unacceptable.

The examples are abundant. One mom shared that her respiratory supplier will only deliver oxygen once a week, even if a child completely runs out of oxygen! This is complete medical negligence, let alone poor service.

We once went through a period when the same customer service representative incorrectly placed my daughter's order for gastric drainage bags for three months in a row. Each month we ran out of bags because of this individual's incompetence, and my daughter suffered dramatically increased pain and vomiting as a result.

It often takes multiple phone calls just to resolve the simplest of issues or even to place an order, wasting precious time we could be spending with our children. Other complaints include schedulers who take vacation and do not leave a back-up person to take or send out orders, delivery service problems and a lack of accountability for deliveries, receiving another person's supplies instead of your child's, and general incompetence in preparation and delivery of orders. The number of incorrect orders from some companies is staggering, and approaches as many as 75% of all orders in some cases.

## **Restricting Equipment and Supply Choices**

It is unfortunately common for a company to restrict its product and supply lines by only carrying one brand of a particular item. This issue is one that is commonly encountered by young children on feeding or IV pumps who need the smallest possible pump due to their tiny stature. Since Home Health Companies make deals with certain manufacturers, this means that some children must carry around a 10 pound pump instead of one that weighs less than a pound, a complete impossibility when the child only weighs 25 pounds.

Even more annoying is the interesting comments you get from customer service representatives about why a certain brand is the only choice available. They have been well-trained to bad-mouth competitors' products, saying they are unreliable or faulty, or insisting that insurance will not cover them. Another frequent excuse is that insurance does not reimburse the company enough to provide good quality equipment or supplies.

Families choose the most appropriate products and equipment for their children, with the help of their doctors. We should be able to get the items that are best for our children, and not just the ones that get a company a nice fat kick-back.

## **Using Substandard Products and Supplies**

A standard practice for Home Health Companies is to bill insurance using a "bundled service" code. This means that all equipment and supplies are bundled under one insurance code and the company receives just one payment. It is common, for example, to bundle a feeding pump and supplies under one code. Because the company receives the same amount of monetary reimbursement no matter how many items they send you, companies often attempt to limit your additional items or substitute poor quality products. In the case of the feeding pump bundle, for example, a family may also request gauze and 60ml syringes. They will often send out the absolute worst gauze and poor quality syringes in order to cut costs. They may also arbitrarily restrict the number of syringes or gauze you can get per month to keep costs low.

In the aforementioned example about how we have been unable to receive the proper pulse oximeter sensors, the ones they are sending are under \$10 while the ones we prefer are more like \$25. They try to get by using the cheapest items possible, even if these cost-cutting measures ultimately cause harm to a child.

## **It Does Not Have to Be This Way!**

In early 2008, we switched to a national infusion specialty company and have been shocked by the difference. This company happily supplies all of my daughter's infusion (IV), enteral, and urological supplies, with just one phone call or email. Orders are almost always 100% correct, extra back-up supplies are always available, emergency

service is prompt and reliable, and we are able to get the exact products we want and need. Not only that, the customer service is fabulous and we are consistently treated like family.

We've learned that we do not have to put up with the incompetent and frankly medically negligent service of our old company. While I was really worried about the whole complicated process of switching over, the new company made things go so smoothly that it was no problem at all.

We are still stuck with our local company for oxygen and supplies, since oxygen must be supplied locally by truck. This company has virtually bought out all the other suppliers of oxygen in the area, making it very difficult to get oxygen from any other source. Every month continues to be a struggle.

If you have an appalling Home Health Company like we did, don't suffer with it any longer. Switch to one of the good companies. They are out there! Often using a local company attached to your hospital, a specialty infusion company, or a company that is well-rated, is the best way to go. Check the Better Business Bureau or simply Google the name of the company with the word "complaint" and you will learn all you need to know.

At some point, I really hope that a governmental agency will take a closer look at the terrible practices of so many of these Home Health Companies. The bad service, incorrect orders, incorrect billing, and financial scams are simply unacceptable, especially when we are talking about life and death medical situations.

By the way, I'm still waiting, three months later, for the appropriate humidifier bottles for my daughter's oxygen set-up. The ones you can buy for \$3 on Amazon and have in two days. In the meantime, my daughter's nose keeps bleeding every day, and with her hemoglobin in the 7s, that is the last thing we need. When will Home Health Companies be forced to stop sickening our children?