

## A \$17,850 urine test: Industry boom amid opioid

By: Fred Schulte, Kaiser Health News

After Elizabeth Moreno had back surgery in late 2015, her surgeon prescribed an opioid painkiller and a follow-up drug test that seemed routine -- until the lab slapped her with a bill for \$17,850.

A Houston lab had tested her urine sample for a constellation of legal and illicit drugs, many of which, Moreno said, she had never heard of, let alone taken.

"I was totally confused. I didn't know how I was going to pay this," said Moreno, 30, who is finishing a degree in education at Texas State University in San Marcos and is pregnant with twins.

Her bill shows that Sunset Labs LLC charged \$4,675 to check her urine for a slew of different types of opioids: \$2,975 for benzodiazepines, a class of drugs for treating anxiety, and \$1,700 more for amphetamines. Tests to detect cocaine, marijuana and phencyclidine, an illegal hallucinogenic drug also known as PCP or angel dust, added \$1,275 more.

The lab also billed \$850 to test for buprenorphine, a drug used to treat opioid addiction, and tacked on an \$850 fee for two tests to verify that nobody had tampered with her urine specimen.

Total bill: \$17,850 for lab tests that her insurer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, refused to cover, apparently because the lab was not in her insurance network. The insurer sent Moreno an "explanation of benefits" that says it would have valued the work at just \$100.92.

Moreno's father, in a complaint to the Texas attorney general's office about the bill, identified the Houston surgeon who ordered the costly test as Dr. Stephen Esses. His office told Kaiser Health News the surgeon would have no comment.

Dan Bowerman, a medical fraud expert, called the lab bill "outrageous" and "unconscionable" and said it should have prompted an investigation.

Sunset's billings "are in line with the charges of competing out-of-network labs in the geographical area," lab attorney Justo Mendez said in an emailed statement.

"Sounds real fishy," added Charles Root, a veteran industry adviser. He wondered if the lab had "misplaced the decimal point," because such a test should cost a few hundred dollars, tops.

Mendez said pain doctors agree that extensive urine testing is "the best course of action" and that

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a lab "is not in the position" to question tests ordered by a doctor.

Urine testing for patients with chronic pain has grown explosively over the past decade amid a rising death toll from opioid abuse. Pain doctors say drug testing helps them make sure patients are taking the drugs as prescribed and not mixing them with illegal substances.

Yet the testing boom costs billions of dollars annually and has raised concerns that some labs and doctors run urine tests needlessly -- or charge exorbitant rates -- to boost profits.

Some insurers have refused to pay, which can leave patients like Moreno threatened with ruinously high bills they had no idea they had incurred.

"Surprise bills larded with unexpected expenses and little explanation inflict sticker shock on vulnerable patients," said James Quiggle, communications director of the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, whose members include insurers, consumer groups and government agencies. Quiggle said many "puffed-up bills straddle a fine line between abuse and outright fraud."