

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Can we continue to justify the fight fee?

It is common in many hospitals in the highlands to charge a fee for the treatment of wounds suffered in tribal fights (clan warfare). These fees have been one source of health service revenue which has kept pace with inflation, but is there any evidence that the prospect of paying for treatment deters would-be warriors?

In parts of the highlands health workers have been increasingly faced with anarchic situations with numerous casualties presenting for treatment as a result of 'tribal fights'. In reality these events have more in common with civil unrest and crime than traditional clan warfare. Gunshot wounds are increasingly being presented by both the innocent as well as the criminally guilty, so how does the health worker in the front line decide who should pay? This frequently places our nursing staff and, less commonly, physicians in the impossible position of trying to be the dispenser of humanitarian aid at the same time as triage officer and unofficial tax collector.

The injured often delay seeking treatment because they, not unnaturally, want to see whether paying the fee will be justified. The early treatment of many assault injuries is likely to be relatively cheap but delayed treatment is the cause of more serious problems which are also much more expensive to cure. There might be some logic in charging late

presenters rather than all presenters, and those that present under the influence of liquor. If there is any rationale to charging injuries based on their cause then perhaps those due to vehicle accidents should be charged, which would be an appropriate way to seek additional revenue for trauma services. This is unlikely to discourage the potential purveyor of injury but at least his victims have insurance rights to reimbursement. We would then collectively be paying for the injuries our vehicles are responsible for; currently they make no direct contribution to the health services.

The fight fee is also placing the underfunded rural health services at jeopardy from payback against our rural health staff. It is becoming increasingly important that health centres and aid posts are respected as places of neutrality and compassion, not as legitimate targets for the mob.

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