



Not unexpectedly the 'fee' has doubled since the first stab by the BHC. Bet that it will double again.

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## **Stretching the journey**

**To the Editor:** A forty-six-year-old woman, mother of six children, was referred to me with a gynaecological problem. She was from an up-country town, approximately 5 hours' drive away. I met her sitting on the steps outside my rooms when I unlocked at 07h30 in the morning. She said she was only booked for an appointment at 12h00, but that the ambulance had dropped her off shortly before. She said that the ambulance driver had other business to attend to in town. We fitted in her consultation in the early part of the morning. During the consultation she told me that she had left home the previous afternoon at 15h00. She said the ambulance had also transported several other people, not all of them patients, and that the driver had decided they would sleep over at another country town approximately half way. They all 'booked in' at the local hospital, where they were 'allowed' to sleep on the floor in the corridor in the casualty department. They resumed

their journey at 04h00 in the morning, the morning of her consultation. No 'dinner, bed or breakfast' was provided, or even morning coffee. The patient said that she preferred to 'use the bushes' at a mid-morning stop next to the road — because the toilet at the hospital where they slept was badly neglected and also because the door couldn't lock. It became clear that her husband was unemployed and she held a job as cleaner at the school hostel, and therefore had the benefit of a medical aid. She could therefore afford the luxury of using the ambulance service. She had no money on her as she had expected the said ambulance service to provide the basics. The patient had therefore been without food or beverage since the previous afternoon at 15h00. It was now 17 hours later. We were happy to provide some basic sustenance, which was greatly appreciated. She was picked up again at 13h00, after spending the whole morning watching the comings and goings in my waiting room.

This unlikely but true story is reported to remind medical colleagues, especially in the rural areas, what may happen to their patients when they are entrusted to the mercy of some ambulance services. I presume the patient's medical aid was expected to pay for her excursion to the specialist and back.

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