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## Activist for Uninsured Needles Hospitals— And Draws Blood

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Taking Up a Latino Cause,  
Mr. Forbes Goes National;  
A Major Shift at Tenet

By RHONDA L. RUNDLE

LOS ANGELES—At a meeting this year with top brass at Tenet Healthcare Corp., the country's second-largest hospital chain, K.B. Forbes pulled out some snapshots. One showed a middle-age Hispanic woman standing in front of a tumble-down mobile home. "You have a lien on this property," Mr. Forbes told a startled executive. "You got it when this woman couldn't pay her hospital bill."

Using hardball tactics like these, Mr. Forbes, a 36-year-old political maverick, has emerged as a rare breed: a successful crusader for the uninsured. He is attacking the widespread practice



K.B. Forbes

among hospitals of billing their poorest patients—the ones who can't afford insurance—at prices many times higher than what insured people pay for the same treatment.

Shortly after that January meeting, Tenet made a dramatic reversal. Announcing a new "Compact With Uninsured Patients," the 114-hospital chain pledged to start giving discounts to uninsured people similar to the discounts it offers managed-care companies. Tenet also said it would stop placing liens on people's homes.

Tenet credits Mr. Forbes with the change. He was able to "sensitize us about the aggressiveness" of the company's bill-collection efforts, says Barry Schochet, the company's vice chairman.

It was the biggest success yet for Mr. Forbes, who formed his tiny activist group—he's the only full-time staffer—two years ago after an acquaintance's sister racked up a \$23,000 bill from a minor car accident. Mr. Forbes, a former journalist, started poring over hospital bills and soon figured out why the numbers seemed so out of whack. Hospitals routinely put very high list prices on their services, but turn around and negotiate deep discounts with insurance companies and managed-care providers. The upshot: Almost no one except the uninsured gets billed the full price.

After his initial success in California,

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# Activist for the Uninsured Needles Hospitals

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he's now targeting cities from Chicago to Orlando. His method: Fly in and head for the courthouse, looking for lawsuits in which hospitals are suing patients over bills. He interviews the defendants, then spins the most heart-wrenching stories into radio, TV and billboard ads designed to embarrass the hospitals.

His group also helped 10 people sue Tenet last year, accusing the chain of operating a "two-tiered billing scheme" that charges uninsured patients "three to 10 times more" than health-maintenance organizations. His only proviso: All the plaintiffs agreed not to settle individually, since Mr. Forbes says the goal wasn't to win a financial windfall, but to seek "fundamental policy change" at Tenet. The suits were consolidated in Santa Ana, Calif., and settled in January, at the same time Tenet's new policy toward the uninsured was announced. Terms weren't disclosed. Tenet at the time was under an unrelated federal investigation into some of its Medicare billing practices, which had sunk its stock price and triggered the resignation of several top executives.

Mr. Forbes is trying to take his campaign national just as the weak U.S. economy is pushing the uninsured issue back up the political agenda. California's state assembly recently passed a measure designed to shield patients from aggressive hospital billing and collection tactics. And in Connecticut, the legislature just passed a groundbreaking patient-protection bill that is expected to soon become law.

While there is disagreement over the extent of the problem, no one disputes it is getting worse. A recent report by the consumer group Families USA says nearly one in three Americans under 65 was uninsured for all or part of 2001 and 2002.

The son-of an Irish-American father and Chilean mother, Mr. Forbes speaks Spanish and targets the Hispanic community, which has the highest proportion of uninsured in the U.S. He says he has met with hundreds of patients.

His nonprofit group, Consejo de Latinos Unidos, or Council of United Latinos, operates out of a small medical clinic in East Los Angeles run by a childhood friend. Mail collects in a cardboard box above some computers. He holds press conferences on a patch of grass behind the clinic, a converted stucco house in a scrappy neighborhood of coin-operated laundromats, liquor stores and butcher shops.

Mr. Forbes comes with a conservative political pedigree, having learned many of his tactics as an aide in the presidential campaigns of Pat Buchanan and Steve Forbes (no relation). He's secretive about his funding, saying only that he got seed money from J. Patrick Rooney, a retired Indianapolis insurance executive and advocate of controversial Republican Party initiatives such as school choice and medical savings accounts. Advocates of such accounts—including many insurance compa-

nies—say they would cut the nation's health-care costs by encouraging people to pay routine bills out of their own pocket, thus forcing them to be cost-conscious.

Mr. Rooney, a friend and former employer of Mr. Forbes, says he provided "initial support," declining to elaborate.

On a visit to Orlando earlier this year, Mr. Forbes set off at 7:10 a.m. in his rented Pontiac Sunfire for 10 meetings with uninsured patients. At his first stop, Lucia Floriano, a Brazilian housekeeper in her fifties, pulled out a \$10,000 bill for a three-day hospital stay. "I will be paying this bill for the rest of my life," she said. Later, Octavio Restrepo, 47, an air-conditioning repairman who broke an elbow after falling off a ladder, wondered how he will pay his \$35,000 bill.

Mr. Forbes promised each one to help devise a "fair" payment plan they can propose to the hospital. Then, pulling out his hand-held tape recorder, he leaned in and urged them to speak their minds.

"If the president of Orlando Regional Medical Center were sitting right here, what would you say to him?" Mr. Forbes asks, referring to a nonprofit hospital where Mr. Restrepo ran up his bill. Mr. Re-

strepo, sitting at his dining-room table, says hospital visits shouldn't mean "instant financial ruin."

Departing, Mr. Forbes tells people to call and ask for him by his nickname, "el gordito," or chubby.

Mr. Forbes is now going after HCA Inc., Nashville, Tenn., the only U.S. hospital chain bigger than Tenet. In Oklahoma City, one ad accuses HCA's OU Medical Center of "gouging" uninsured patients to help cover the \$1.7 billion that the company has agreed to pay since 2000 to settle federal Medicare-fraud allegations. In Colorado, Mr. Forbes has written to the attorney general claiming that HCA dispatched "collection goons" to "harass a dying mother."

In March, HCA announced a new "financial relief" program for the uninsured that promises "a sliding scale of discounts" tied to various patient income tests. Mr. Forbes slammed it as "worthless fluff." An HCA spokesman defended the policy, and says it wasn't in response to Mr. Forbes's campaign. His attacks on the company "make nice sound bites," a company spokesman said, "but we're more interested in a real solution."