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By David Bradvica

Cancer Victims Angry at HMOs

Larry Blackwell says he does not want to see other prostate cancer patients go through what he had to when his insurance company balked at paying for his cancer treatment.

That's why the 60-year-old Yucaipa resident has lent the name of his nonprofit organization, Cancer Victims for Quality Healthcare, to a class-action lawsuit filed in Los Angeles County last month targeting five of the state's largest health maintenance organizations for denying coverage for proton beam radiation therapy.

"I'm no do-gooder," Blackwell said. "But this has got to stop."

It took nearly 1 1/2 years for Blackwell and his wife, Michelle, to convince their insurer, Aetna, to pay for the \$30,000 therapy, which is available only at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

What the Blackwells learned during his battle with cancer, which was diagnosed in January 1999, was that many other patients undergoing proton beam therapy were fighting the same battle with their insurance companies. And most were losing, he said.

Medicare and Aetna now cover the therapy. But five of California's largest HMOs -- Blue Shield, Kaiser Permanente, Cigna Healthcare, Pacificare and Health Net -- do not. This has made them the target of the Cancer Patients for Quality Healthcare's lawsuit.

The suit claims the five HMOs are breaking the law by refusing the therapy and denying the coverage for financial gain and asks a judge to order them to cover the proton beam therapy. However, the HMOs have consistently said that the proton beam therapy is experimental and could not be covered.