

Today's Auto Repair

with Chip Stewart

- How Much? -

Did you ever call up your doctor and say "Hey, Doc I'm sick what's wrong with me and how much will it cost me to get better?" Probably not. But, you know, a lot of folks will call up their local mechanic and say something like "My car isn't running right - what's wrong with it and how much will it cost to get it fixed?" Quite frankly, until a proper diagnosis is performed neither your doctor nor your mechanic can give you much information. In fact, there's a good chance that you could be misled entirely.

Today's sophisticated automobiles have more technology in them than it took to land on the moon. Some have over a dozen on-board computers that control everything from engines and transmissions to air conditioning and emission control systems. Diagnosing that technology is the greatest challenge of today's automotive technician. It takes special training and special equipment. Diagnostic equipment seldom costs less than several hundred dollars per item to as much as sixty thousand dollars for a complete system and, along with the expense of training, it's easy to see why diagnosing is a chargeable procedure. Quite often a technician can locate a problem with a simple road test or a quick "look-see". But, occasionally, the diagnosis can be a major undertaking involving more time to locate the problem than to repair it. Some problems are intermittent and virtually impossible to find. This is a situation where good communication between you and your technician or service advisor could save a lot of troubleshooting time. They might ask a multitude of questions about when and under what conditions the problem occurs. Knowing the answers can help them save time and therefore, save you money. Questions asked may include: When the problem shows up, is the engine hot or cold or just warm? What's the outside temperature? Are you driving any particular way like fast or slow, uphill or downhill, cornering or stopping? How much weight are you hauling? What gear is the transmission in? Has anyone worked on your car recently? What kind of maintenance has your car had? (If you're a "do-it-yourselfer" it would be prudent to admit working on the vehicle yourself and possibly installing a problem by accident.)

Sometimes, in order to complete a diagnosis, the system may have to be dismantled for visual inspection. Only then can the technician be sure of what failed and why. This, also, is a chargeable procedure but it's usually part of the cost of the repair.

So, when you have a problem with your car, call your favorite repair facility and make an appointment to bring your car in for a diagnosis. Most shops have set fees for most diagnostic procedures and the service manager there will be happy to discuss those with you. And remember - the best way to avoid car problems is by scheduling regular preventative maintenance. We'll discuss "P.M." in another article.

