The HMO - Great Medical Care If You Are Not Sick!

HMOs came up with a black eye when 1063 doctors and 768 nurses of the Kaiser Foundation responded to a survey to evaluate quality. A whopping 87% of the doctors said they had patients who were denied coverage by health plans. They reported that the patients often eventually got the coverage when the doctors argued enough. However, over half of the doctors and nurses said they were obliged to exaggerate the severity of a patient’s medical condition in order to get treatment. Moreover, in a separate report HMOs last year made no progress on advising smokers to quit, on cervical cancer screening or follow-up care for mental illness. The report from the National Committee for Quality Assurance also showed that 27% of patients complained of trouble getting needed care.

Be Careful If You Are Seated On A Standing Committee.

It must be open season on editors as now the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) has sacked Jerome P. Kassirer, M.D, editor for eight years of the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM), in disagreement over “publication policy.” The MMS wants to increase their outside income (does this sound familiar), and wants to publish specialty journals using articles rejected by the NEJM. Dr. Kassirer and the publication committee refused, claiming it would diminish the prestige of the present journal, so the MMS said it was time to go. Dr. Kassirer said he was surprised by the decision, but also stated that disagreements had become more intense in the past year. The underlying point, like the catastrophic Sunbeam episode with the AMA, is the conflict between commercialism and professionalism. As the old saying goes, “no matter what they are talking about, they’re talking about money.”

Americans Believe In Trial By Jury - Except When Called To Serve On One.

A star professional basketball player dropped dead at age 27 of cardiac arrhythmia during practice. A cardiologist had previously evaluated him after he collapsed during a game, but stated that the athlete suffered from a neurological condition that caused fainting spells. However, a team of cardiologists had also evaluated the player and stated that he had a life-threatening arrhythmia. Two weeks later the athlete dropped dead, and the widow brought a malpractice suit against the cardiologists. Testimony at trial was prolonged with multiple medical experts, and there the doctor revealed that the athlete stated he was a former cocaine user, and had ignored the doctors’ orders. A jury was expected to determine if this is physician neglect, drug abuse, patient neglect, or a combination thereof. They failed and ultimately a mistrial was declared. As Professor Jerome Bettman, M.D, has stated, “A trial is a contest of impressions and has little to do with facts.”

Success Comes In Cans; Failure In Cant’s

A study in the July Journal of Internal Medicine showed that a stamp can do more than deliver the mail. By adding a simple stamp on a patient’s chart noting smoking status - “current/former/never” caused the doctor to increase a smoking discussion from 45% to 78% with individual patients. That advice resulted in doubling the number of patients entering cessation programs from 6 to 12%. Or, to put it more simply, unless reminded, we doctors often fail to communicate. (Thanks, J.M.)

None Of The Secrets Of Success Will Work Unless You Do.

While the Hawaii Medical Association, the AMA and other state associations, are struggling to keep members, Texas Medical Association is growing with members and enthusiasm. Why, in this era of hard times? The reason is that the TMA was able to get the Texas Legislature to pass a physician collective bargaining bill. The law explicitly bans physician strikes, boycotts, or slow-downs. The bill is a giant step toward preserving the patient-physician relationship. The law allows self-employed physicians to negotiate collectively with health plans under the supervision of the state attorney general. The Texas statute says negotiations between physicians and health plans are voluntary and non-binding, but in fact HMOs publicly concede that they would be hard pressed to turn away key physician groups. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Federation of Independent Business, the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Association of Health Plans all lobbied against the bill. The claim is that fees will go up leading to reduced affordability, access, and coverage. The TMA claims that the law could actually stabilize or even reduce costs because physicians can challenge inane and bureaucratic contract provisions that delay care. What might be the chances of such a bill for Hawaii? Probably, very slim, but what a great membership issue!

All Computer Programs Contain Errors Until Proven Otherwise - Which Is Impossible.

A 42 year old psycho-therapist stopped at the drug store to refill her migraine prescription, but was refused by the pharmacist. The company that manages her benefits decided she was taking too many kinds of medicine. “I felt violated. The company made it look like I was a probable drug addict.” Now a new breed of pharmacy benefit managers maintain computerized records in order to recommend less expensive medications, to warn about wrong combination of drugs, and prevent patients from taking a drug longer than recommended. The dispute illustrates some benefits, but also the dangers of computerized medical information. Employers seek more background data, and HMOs want more information. But what about safeguarding privacy? Our befuddled Congress and the Dept. of Health and Human Services are mandated to make federal privacy rules, but so far it is a joke. The public is fed up. A national survey revealed that at least one of six patients fails to complete medical forms, or has used an alias for certain tests, or paid cash to avoid an insurance claim. In Maine a new law prohibits the release of any medical information without written permission from the patient with a fine of $50,000 for any violation. Hospitals have clammed up, even about confirming an admission, which was more than patients wanted.

It’s Not An Optical Illusion, It Just Looks Like One.

In an attempt to provide free vaccines for uninsured children in low-income families, Congress established the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Federal money was allocated for states to expand Medicaid or create new programs. Exercising the latter option, California set up Healthy Families to provide medical insurance coverage for uninsured kids. However, free vaccines were denied when Secretary Shalala announced that the federal government in its Vaccines for Children plan would provide free vaccines only to uninsured and Medicaid-eligible children. That eliminated the children insured under California’s Healthy Families. Is anyone in charge here?

Imhoff’s Law Of The Septic Tank - The Really Big Chunks Float To The Top.

The recent prosecution of the Kapiolani Health Plan for Medicaid fraud pointed to the fact that the big cheaters are not at the corner family clinic. The whistle-blower pocketed more than $600,000 for informing the federal investigators, as the law provides, and in this case it was a nurse close to the scene who reported the sin. But meantime, the Fraud and Abuse teams are busy holding seminars to educate patients on how to read the doctor bill in hopes of catching some unfortunate physician in a billing error. Kapiolani paid the penalty, but no names were mentioned in the multi-million dollar case. No matter what excuse or rationalization the fraud people offer, the plan to turn patients into investigators drives a poisonous stake into the nature of trust and mutual respect necessary to effective medical care.

ADDENDA

♦ According to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, it takes the urine of 75,000 pregnant mares to make a year’s supply of Premarin for post-menopausal women.

♦ Many of those people who insist on keeping a gun at home for safety, are the same ones who never fasten a seat belt.

♦ After Oprah did a show on women who fake orgasms, Geraldo had a show about men who fake bowel movements. Aloha and keep the faith —rts