In The Words Of The Late Louisiana Governor, Earl Long, "I Never Buy Politicians. It Is Cheaper To Rent Them."

The 2000 Hawaii legislative session is over without significant change in the scope of practice for ophthalmologic pretenders. For the present time the old adage remains - "If you want to be a physician, go to medical school." Certain key legislators recognize the dangers inherent in allowing unqualified people to practice medicine, and will listen to effective explanations. A few others are influenced by monetary lobbying, and present bills which could endanger the public. This year HOS leadership was again outstanding in attending hearings, testifying, and urging campaign contributions. On behalf of the HOS (and the public) thank you very much, President Timothy McDevitt.

Change Is Inevitable, Except From Vending Machines.

The use of herbal supplements continues to expand in the "alternative medicine" sphere. Responding to lay publications, the internet, advertisements, and testimonials, an increasing number of our patients are using gingko biloba, garlic, ephedra and echinacea, to mention a few. Now, the interesting part is that some herbs can cause prolonged bleeding, gastritis, stroke, or cardiac arrhythmia while others can interact with anesthetic drugs. Do your patient's tell you what they are taking? A study at Texas Tech revealed that fully 70% of the patients using these remedies, failed to tell their doctors even when asked. Apparently, some patients fear that their doctors will make fun of them. The comforting part for the alternative practitioners is that they needn't be troubled by such things as scientific proofs.

There Are Those Living Under The Shadow Of Medical Sciences.

Hemodialysis reactions are rare but can be life-threatening. Usually such events are related to contamination with toxins or bacteria. In hospital A in a brief time period, seven patients on hemodialysis with an inpatient dialysis unit, developed acute onset diminished vision and hearing. The eye findings ranged through conjunctivitis, corneal opacities, optic neuritis, optic atrophy, uveitis, vertical nystagmus, and seventh nerve palsy. A careful analysis was conducted to identify risk factors, and construct a retrospective cohort to identify the source of the adverse events. Ultimately, it was determined that the patient injuries were associated with exposure to aged cellulose acetate membranes of dialyzers, allowing degradation products to enter the blood. The morbidity was severe as four case patients never fully recovered and five of the seven died within thirteen months.


The question of integrity in academic medicine has risen again with the hiring of the latest editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, Jeffrey Drazen, M.D. Harvard Professor Drazen forthrightly admits his financial relationships, which includes at least 21 pharmaceutical ties, ranging from stock ownership to consulting fees. Some of his companies are the heaviest hitters in the business, such as Merck, Pfizer, Glaxo Wellcome and Eli Lilly. The professor said that financing research is an ongoing problem, and that industry funding is necessary to pay for the large and expensive clinical trials required by the Food and Drug Administration to get a drug approved. Dr. Drazen (brazen Drazen?) stated, "My relationship with the entire industry has always been aboveboard." "At some point in the future, the policies (conflict of interest) may need to be re-examined, but the journal’s most precious asset is that its decisions are not influenced by secondary gain." Oh really, but what is that old phrase about paying the piper and dancing with the devil?

Our Constitution Protects Aliens, Drunks, Congress And The Supreme Court.

With a rare unanimous decision the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that patients cannot sue in federal court for damages generated from an HMO physician who is rewarded for not providing care. The explanation given is that the federal government has encouraged HMOs to ration care and that the ERISA statute does not provide such legal complaint. Trial attorneys seem not dissuaded, however, because the ruling implies that such complaints may proceed in state courts where punitive damages can be added. Previous court decisions reveal that juries hold great sympathy for patients victimized by insurance plans when care is denied based upon monetary motives. Whatever - the lawyers are sure to find an avenue to the deep pockets.

Not Only Is There No God, But Try Getting Seen At An HMO On Week-Ends.

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, HMOs are losing favor with patients on a nationwide basis. Closed panel HMOs are flat at 30% for the past two years, while open-ended HMOs have declined from 20% to 16% in 1999. Meanwhile PPO memberships have grown stronger, moving from 35 to 43% in the same time. More employers now prefer PPOs because they don't limit coverage to a closed panel of providers, most allow self-referrals to specialists, and they don't require plan's approval before beginning treatment regimes. PPO patients are less likely to be denied needed care, and that reduces employers' risk of liability.

Might Doesn't Make Right, But It Never Gives Up Trying.

In an outrageous display of intimidating power Oxford Health Plans in New York is demanding that some 200 primary care physicians return payment for services which deviated from "HCFA national benchmarks." Some of the claims range up to $100,000, and Oxford informed physicians they must pay 75% within 10 days or the matter will be turned over to arbitration. But wait! There are no HCFA benchmarks for E&M coding for office visits, as stated by Terrence Kay, HCFA's director of practitioner and ambulatory care. Alan Money, M.D. Oxford CEO, later admitted that there are no such benchmarks, but their own consulting firm developed them "using HCFA data." Arbitration is expensive and some physicians have just paid Oxford, but Scott Einiger, counsel for the New York County Medical Society, believes that Oxford is misrepresenting HCFA, and is strong-arming doctors into repaying money that they don’t owe. The question is why doesn’t Oxford deny the claims in the first place if they believe they are miscoded? The probable explanation is that Oxford is skirting around the statute requirement to pay clean claims within 45 days, by coding as coded and then making demands for repayment at a subsequent date.

There Is No Limit To How Bad Things Can Get.

There is an old saying that figures don't lie, but liars figure. Hawaii Medical Service Association announced that they will raise rates for about 10,000 small Hawaii businesses by about 8.5% starting July 1st. This comes on top of last year’s increase of 8%, meaning a whopping 16.5% in two years. Many small businesses are suffering, and have no choice but to try to pass it on to customers, except for those of us in medicine who are locked into reimbursement schedules. Yet just this past month HMSA announced that net profits more than tripled in 1999, rising to $35.9 million. HMSA called in the accountants to show 1999 operational cost increase (loss) of 1.7%, to average any suggestion of exploitation. Yet, isn’t there something strange about this picture? The profits have tripled, competition (other than Kaiser) is almost obliterated, so let’s ratchet rates up even more! And this is a mutual serving us members?

Washington Couldn't Tell A Lie, Nixon Couldn't Tell The Truth, And Clinton Couldn't Tell The Difference.

The Charlemagne Prize is a German medal awarded annually “to deserving personalities who have fostered the idea of Western unification in political, economic and intellectual spiritual regard.” This pantheon of statesmen includes Winston Churchill, Vaclav Havel and Konrad Adenauer to mention a few. Only two Americans, George C. Marshall in 1959 and Henry Kissinger in 1987, have been so honored. This year’s award goes to William J. Clinton! Now perhaps because I am slightly distant from the baby boomer generation, it is difficult for me to think of a draft-dodging, dress staining, lying poitroon who was fined $89,000 by a federal judge for lying, whom may be disbarred by the Arkansas Supreme Court, and was only the second president to suffer impeachment, as deserving of such recognition. But, perception varies, and apparently it is easy for the sixties generation to put aside trival loyalty aberrations and “minor” peccadillos.

ADDENDA

* 40 fireflies in a jar will generate enough light to read by.
* Pat Buchanan’s move from the Republican to the Reform Party raised the intellectual level of both.
* Everything in California is drive through. They even have a burial service called “Jump in the Box.”

Aloha and keep the faith — rtsl

Contents of this column do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the Hawaii Ophthalmological Society. Editorial comment is strictly that of the writer.