



Dealing with Malpractice Stress, Part II

Roland W. Gray, M.D.

Last article, we talked about malpractice stress syndrome – the emotional patterns doctors tend to follow through the course of a malpractice lawsuit and the symptoms of major depression, which often sets in as a result of the experience.

This article, we will delve into the coping mechanisms that doctors have found useful during times of professional stress and particularly during a malpractice lawsuit.

Through State Volunteer Mutual Insurance Company (SVMIC), TMA and the Tennessee Medical Foundation, doctors have strong allies before, during and after the experience of a malpractice lawsuit. For 12 years now, SVMIC has sponsored the “Physicians in Malpractice Litigation” seminar across Tennessee. This year, our panel visited Memphis in early May, and is scheduled to be in Nashville on June 1, Knoxville on September 14, and in Kingsport on October 25.

I, along with SVMIC Vice-President of Risk Management Debbie Willis, JD, and SVMIC Risk Management Committee Member John Crockarell, MD, who is a Memphis neurosurgeon, work to help doctors prepare themselves for the harsh reality of malpractice litigation. Along with walking physicians through the details of court procedure, depositions, documentation, etc., the seminar also instructs them on ways to handle the stress that comes with this kind of professional challenge.

The first thing I ask physicians to do is take charge of their medical practice, to watch the hours they work. As we mentioned last month, doctors often use denial to deal with malpractice stress and it is interesting to note that, rather than taking more time off or taking time to take care of themselves, many doctors start working longer hours and that is one way they’re able to deny the process. I tell them to take time off if necessary and to realize the work will be there when this is over.

As for the family experience during a malpractice lawsuit, physicians must work on maintaining their personal relationships. They also need to be very careful about the use of any controlled or uncontrolled substances to relax or to sleep. They may use them to help escape from the litigation process but many of them start heading down a slippery slope when they start self-medicating.

Unfortunately, it takes a crisis for physicians to learn skills to manage stress but that is when a lot of them do it. The skills, as we’ve mentioned so many times in our column, include: getting enough rest and exercise; developing a meditative life, taking some quiet time to work on their spiritual needs; developing a life outside of medicine, i.e., hobbies like fishing, golf, or something they enjoy, so they have a life outside their medical practice.

Finally, one of the most effective coping mechanisms we’ve found is to join a support group, to share their experiences. TMF has support groups set up around the state, and thanks to legislation sponsored by TMA and SVMIC, the confidentiality of what goes on in these groups is protected by law. They’re able to share their feelings about what they’re going through without fear of being discovered or the information used against them.

It’s unfortunate that malpractice litigation has become a part of the medical environment today; the good news is there are healthy ways to deal with malpractice stress. This is one of the areas we’ve been able to help physicians with over the years. As always, the work we do at TMF is confidential and free of charge to physicians.

If you or someone you know needs help in managing their professional stress and particularly that caused by a lawsuit, please don’t hesitate to call. Contact our Clinical Coordinator, Jeanne Breard, at 615-467-6411 to set up an appointment. Help is on the way!

To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physician's Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411, or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.

Republished with permission of the Tennessee Medical Association and Tennessee Medicine, ©2006.