Medical Ideals Not Always Easy to Live Up To

BY JOEL B. FINKELSTEIN
Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON — Easier said than done. That may be the take-away message from a study that revealed troubling gaps between physicians' attitudes and behavior when it comes to standards of professionalism.

A national survey of 3,500 primary care and specialist physicians found that 95% said physicians should report incompetent or impaired colleagues. However, only 56% of those who had been in a position to do so, in fact, did.

"It's simply not acceptable that bad physicians aren't being reported to the proper authorities," said Dr. James N. Thompson, president and CEO of the Federation of State Medical Boards, at a press briefing to release the findings.

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"Most physicians are trying to do the right thing, under increasingly difficult circumstances," said Dr. David Blumenthal, who is the director of the Institute for Health Policy at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, and senior author of the study (Ann. Intern. Med. 2007;147:795-802).

Those circumstances include not only financial pressures, but also the seemingly constant threat of lawsuits, he said.

"I'm neither surprised nor disheartened by the study's outcome. It just shows that doctors are people," said Dr. Ari Silver-Isenstadt, a pediatrician at Franklin Square Hospital Center in Baltimore

For example, while 96% of physicians said that they should put the patient's welfare above their own financial interests, 84% had accepted food or beverages from drug company representatives. Smaller percentages admitted that they had received drug samples, admission to CME events, consulting or speaking fees, travel tickets to sporting events and other industry provided perks.

Physicians may feel they are not influenced by such marketing, but even the appearance of a conflict can undermine patient trust.

"It took me awhile to recognize that I am just as vulnerable as any other Joe to advertising, but given my fiduciary responsibility to my patients, I have to be more vigilant," said Dr. Silver-Isenstadt, who recalled the novelty and allure of industry grants and gifts when he was new to the profession.

Despite everyday obstacles to professionalism, the authors took it as a hopeful sign that physicians have the right attitude. What is needed next is the ability to bridge that divide between attitude and action in a nonpunitive environment.

"We have to create a health care system that is safe for professionalism," said Dr. Blumenthal.

That is borne out by the work of both national groups and more local efforts, said Dr. Peter Cohen, a retired anesthesiologist who chairs the physicians health program for the Medical Society of the District of Columbia, which steps in when physicians are found to be abusing drugs or alcohol.

"We have hospitals reporting, patients reporting, colleagues reporting. They know that … they are doing both the drug-abusing physician and society a favor, because these people do get into treatment and over 90% return to practice," said Dr. Cohen, who also is an adjunct professor of law at Georgetown University, Washington.

"It's not enough to just say 'woe is us, we've got a disconnect.' It's important that people look for the reasons behind the disconnect and do something about it. … As more and more knowledge is gathered, the disconnect will begin to disappear," he said. ■

FYI

Elderly Mental Health Care Services

To help communities provide support services for older adults' mental health needs, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is accepting applications for the Older Adults Targeted Capacity Expansion Grants. More information is at www.samhsa.gov/Grants/2008/sm_08_008.aspx.

Substance Abuse in Young Adults

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has released a national survey short report entitled "Depression and the Initiation of Cigarette, Alcohol, and Other Drug Use Among Young Adults." The report is based on statistics that were gathered from adults aged 18-25 years and suggests that mental disorders can cause substance abuse and vice versa. To download the report, visit http://oas.samhsa.gov/2k7/newusers/depression.cfm. To obtain free copies, call 877-726-4727.

Anti–Underage Drinking Comic Book

Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four superheroes will promote a message against underage drinking in a new video comic book for the Elks National Drug Awareness Program. The comic book, launched in collaboration with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is available at www.elks.org/Marvel.cfm.

Resources on Co-Occurring Disorders

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Co-Occurring Center for Excellence has published three new reports ("Services Integration: Overview Paper 6," "Systems Integration: Overview Paper 7," and "The Epidemiology of Co-Occurring Substance Use and Mental Disorders: Overview Paper 8") to help mental health professionals treat people who have co-occurring substance abuse and mental disorders. The papers can be obtained for free by calling 877-726-4727.

Helping Older Adults Search Online

The National Institute on Aging is offering a free curriculum titled "Helping Older Adults Search for Health Information Online: A Toolkit for Trainers." Instructors can use this curriculum to teach elderly people how to find health information on the Web. The curriculum also contains easy-to-read health information from NIHSeniorHealth in different formats, including open-captioned videos and large type. To get more information, visit http://nihseniorhealth.gov/toolkit.

New Multilanguage Resources

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has released publications for non–English speakers. "What is Substance Abuse Treatment? A Booklet for Families" is now available in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean, as well as Russian and Spanish. This and other products, including booklets translated into Navajo, can be downloaded at www.kap.samhsa.gov/mli.

Spanish Language Web Site

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has relaunched its Spanish language Web site, CDC en Español, with new features. The site provides up-to-date information on health promotion and disease prevention topics of special interest to Hispanic communities, including asthma, cancer, HIV/AIDS, immunizations, children's health, diabetes, and occupational hazards. CDC en Español receives more than 6 million visitors a year. The Web site address is www.cdc.gov/spanish.

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