

GREED

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Those in positions of public trust should be purer than others, but sadly, neither Ceasar nor his wife were lily-white, and things have not improved since. Physicians are surely not worse than others but they have a special responsibility as members of the most trusted of all professions. Noblesse oblige. Even though Medicine provides us with the means to earn a very good living and to live honorably, it is not simply a business. In the rush of things some of us tend to forget that even the appearance of greed among us might tarnish our image.

I have recently been told of a local physician who charges \$250.00 for an initial work-up for vaginal herpes, and a few surgeons charge over \$1,000.00 for an operation that lasts less than two hours. One prominent colleague used to expect a \$5,000.00 fee for a certain relatively short surgical procedure with the explanation that he was a true artist. Comparing himself to Rembrandt he claimed to have unique gifts and talents and, therefore, entitled to charge what he saw fit. He was usually quite busy, and this for him was sufficient proof that his charges were reasonable.

Although an extreme example, less obvious cases are not so uncommon. Physicians sometimes prescribe or perform procedures in part for financial gain and not always for valid medical reasons alone. Costly laboratory and other tests are prescribed for other than diagnostic needs, and costly hospitalizations are initiated or prolonged on many occasions for other reasons than the patient's benefit. How many shenanigans remain unknown, even to most of us? Almost everyone knows of a questionable practice, sometimes of scandalous proportions, although most physicians are hard-working, honest and dedicated beyond the call of duty.

What is the fair value of a physician's time? Surely it ought to be related to what happens in the economy. We carry a far heavier load of responsibility than lawyers who charge \$100.00 to \$150.00 an hour, and yet most physicians earn considerably less per same unit of time. High earnings of physicians reflect, in part, the 60 to 70 hours per week that many devote to their practices. In principle, we surely deserve to be paid fairly so we may live comfortably and well, and to provide some for the immediate and distant future. Clinical burdens are heavy enough and the hours much too long, so we ought to be free of also worrying about financial matters. But, he who wants to get rich should seek his fortune outside of Medicine. Prudent investments and good luck may result in some of us becoming wealthy, but the main attraction to Medicine ought to be different than the financial rewards that it also provides.

The availability of third-party payments has, in effect, placed billions of dollars directly before physicians and provided them with legal opportunities to draw from these huge sums. The temptation to abuse such a privilege has been resisted by most physicians, although it is a constant test of human nature. If power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, so does money. The ability to write vouchers that are generally honored when presented for payment is a powerful seduction that must consistently and always be held in check.

A special trust was granted to us by society to prescribe according to our best judgment and to charge fees for doing so. If abused, such a trust can, should and eventually would be withdrawn. Gross abusers must obviously be identified and stopped, but even those who yield to greedy temptation infrequently should remember that it is not only ethically and morally wrong to do so, but also foolhardy. The U.A.W. did not heed the warning signals that they were killing the goose that laid the golden egg, and paid dearly for it. We should learn from their mistakes.

The fact that the goose is not in good shape and that it might soon die serves for some as another justification to bilk it of its remaining strength while it is still around. Those engaged in such practices, together with the rest of us who do not, must realize that we may all soon regret further tolerance of such abuses.

The enemies of our profession may wish to use an article such as this to kick us with, but they use anything valid and invalid anyway. Our integrity and self-interest both require that we focus on our imperfections and clean our ranks. Self-policing by every physician reading these words is infinitely better than correction from the outside. Each of us ought to wonder whether anything said or implied here applies to his or her practice and take the initiative to review charges and correct any improprieties that might be found.