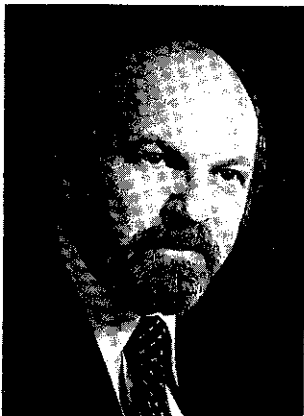


editorial



Private Practice, Public Waste

By Reuven Bar-Levav, MD

One out of nine people in Michigan, over one million individuals, are on Medicaid. Almost a billion dollars, close to one thousand million dollars, are spent in Michigan alone from the public coffers to maintain the health of the so-called "needy." Some of the money is spent in payments to physicians, now called providers, and much goes to public and private hospitals. Detroit Receiving was always a front-line facility in this area, offering excellent medical care to those in urgent need. It is understandable, therefore, that I was eager to participate in the conducted tours of the new Detroit Receiving Hospital and its clinics that were recently available to members of our County Medical Society. I wanted to see how some of this money is spent. I saw.

The new place does not resemble the old Receiving Hospital in any way. It does resemble, however, the most luxurious new Hyatt hotels around the country. The vibrant color schemes are beautiful. The corridors are spacious. The walls are mirrored. Interior spaces are filled with original, good art. Rich two-tone carpeting and indirect lighting are everywhere. The furniture is plush. The medical equipment leaves absolutely nothing to be desired.

The reception area was so beautiful and color-coordinated that many of us lingered. It was truly a pleasure and a delight to spend some time in those elegant surroundings, but it was extremely difficult to remember that funds for all this were allocated in the name of helping the poor.

The place was different from the old hospital also in the sense that it was not busy. I remember the old emergency room with its hustle and bustle, floors that were always full with human activity, suffering, dedication and hard work. Not so here. I didn't see even a single policeman during the few hours I was there, and not once was anyone being rushed anywhere. Are ice picks no longer used for stabs in the heart?

I was not surprised to learn that the cost of a day's hospitalization is over seven hundred and forty-four dollars, yes, \$744.00! Outpatient procedures are likewise reimbursed at rates that are four and five times higher than those paid to private physicians in their offices. The hospital and clinics could simply not keep up their opulent standard of existence otherwise. Like all hospitals, this "non-profit" institution is reimbursed by Blue Cross and most insurance carriers on a "cost-reimbursement" basis, a euphemism for "cost-plus." Trouble is that I, a private practitioner working for a living, am forced to subsidize all this from my own hard earned dollars, not only through taxation but also by paying more for my own health insurance.

I also saw many physician-colleagues, all in impressive white coats, who work full-time at this "not for profit" hospital, as others do at Ford, Sinai, Beaumont, St. John's and other medical centers. They seemed understandably content in their roles as hospital physicians. Why not? They are less affected by the economic squeeze, and most of their

jobs and incomes are secure, and if they wish they can even look down self-righteously upon "greedy" private practitioners who expect a fee for service from patients even in these hard times. Their work load is often embarrassingly light and their hours are by now no longer embarrassingly short. In the pursuit of "medical education" they can travel. Interns and residents are always at hand to look after the daily routine. And, above all as spokesmen for the needy and the poor they can steadfastly resist all governmental pressures for budgetary restraints and cuts.

The divided voice of our profession is in large part the result of so many physicians seeing the world through their newly acquired bureaucratic eyes. Many have thrown in their lot with these fat institutions and have learned to manipulate the emotions of the public so that the huge drain of public funds will continue and increase forever. It is a form of hidden coercion since no politician can resist it without incurring the wrath of the electorate.

I will stay in private practice. Life is difficult sometimes, but the beautiful surroundings in my office are fully paid for by my own labor. I do not claim a "not for profit" status, and I do pay taxes. But, I can maintain my integrity and my dignity, as any working man doing an honest job always could.

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