

IT'S A CRYING SHAME!

It's a crying shame! I look around and see a lot of the most talented, experienced physicians that I have known personally, and worked with professionally throughout my entire career, quit their practices or pursue another livelihood. *Getting out, Giving it up, Throwing in the towel, Hanging it up.* These are some of the laments utilized by the recently retired, those that have declared an emancipation date of retirement, and those that have decided to move onto other pursuits. They always say it with a genuine smile and a perceived sigh of relief on their faces. It's almost like it's some badge of honor or courage now to give up the practice of medicine or to find another career. It shouldn't be this way!

Old established groups, whose names read like Fortune 500 companies to me, are now gone forever and it's not because the doctors are still not capable. Aren't doctors supposed to practice until they are truly disabled or dead (as in my dad's case)? I know that isn't the situation now. I work out with some of our recently retired colleagues and a lot of them are in better shape than I am and I'm no slouch! (Maybe they have some antioxidants that I'm not aware of)! Maybe it's a rite of passage for me, but this phenomenon is a heartfelt loss for me as well as it is for the unknowing community.

So why do they retire so early? Some would answer it's *because they can*. I feel that answer is too simplistic and the real answer is a lot deeper than that. I've asked our cohorts and you probably can guess a lot of the answers. Topping the list is managed care. Another reason is the degradation of the profession with a loss of a certain reverence that once was prevalent. Others include the hassle factor, loss of autonomy, and the liabilities; HIPAA, EMTALA, Medicare and other regulations that have criminalized medicine are also on the list of answers. (Whoever thought that an accidental coding error could send you to jail while practicing good medicine.)

Physicians are becoming – if not already – employees of the insurance industry and Medicare but without all the attending perks of an employee, such as, health insurance, unemployment insurance, disability insurance, liability insurance, retirement plans, etc. We have to pay for this ourselves and then accept their price fixing of some multiple or fraction of the Medicare fee schedule. *That's only by your choice*, they adamantly proclaim! Yeah right! These are the most frequently quoted topics that come up when I query our retired or escaped brethren.

This early retirement scenario robs the community of the true 'top docs'; some of whom I wish were still around to care for me when I get sick. This is one of my fears. Who is going to be around to take care of us when we get sick? (Maybe we should make a pact now to take care of each other!)

I was at my daughters' initial university counseling session to choose her major and the counselor was mentioning how competitive it is to get into the engineering and business schools these days. So, being the person that I am, I chirped in "How about Premed?" She did not blink an eye, break stride, pause to contemplate, or even stop to consider that I may be a physician (she still doesn't know). She reflexively educates me that "none of the really smart or talented kids go into medicine anymore." The shock momentarily took me back, and then the anger built up and was quickly dissolved into dismay. Then the sadness entered as I remembered from my

youth that medical school was once the pinnacle. The best of the best. It was a career choice only available to the best and the brightest. Then it hit me. Of course! Who would choose such a battered profession when so many are trying to get out of it at the other end? Then it all made sense and that is why they are the 'really smart' kids.

Our elected officials try to please the populace by burdening us with more and more regulations and unfunded mandates under the guise that they are improving access and quality of care. Can you think of any recent legislation that has truly made any improvement of this sort? I certainly can't. The reality is that care is being rationed by motivating more physicians to either quit or restrict their practice. Could this be their disguised goal? Is this their intent? A secret plot to rid the community of physicians by thinning the herd?

A physician recently sent a letter into Forbes magazine (the only other magazine I read besides *Round-up*). He wrote, "While we are humanists by nature, we all swim in the same capitalistic sea. As any black ink turns to red, will our brightest physicians-to-be have any reason to pursue medicine or will they choose a more tranquil harbor – perhaps law? By the time the body politic responds, many of us will have faded away." I know, I know. Telling you this is like preaching to the choir. You already know this. But I tell you, without the choir there is no melody. There is only a bunch of screeching and caterwauling without direction and tempo.

The people that must see what we see. The people that must come to the realization that this is happening are our elected officials and the public. The public must be aware of the true situation. Bend their ear whenever you get the opportunity. Several months ago we published the phone numbers and email addresses of our elected officials in *Round-up* and they are also available on the Society's website; www.medical-society.com under the President's Page. Use it! I am afraid that the only thing that will generate change is when truly influential people can't get appropriate care anymore. Only then will they realize what has happened to our system. This system and what has and is happening cannot be fixed in a few short years. It will take longer than that. It will be difficult and almost impossible to correct. But it must be done.

Alas, I truly have fears of the care that I will receive when I get old and feeble. I know that I am not alone in this fear as I've had many discussions of this sort in the doctors' lounges. I plan on living a long time. I plan on practicing a long time. I plan on teaching my grandkids how to fish. I definitely plan on being my general menacing self for as long as I'm on the right side of the sod. One thing that will give me great comfort is knowing that when I get sick, I will have the confidence of being cared for by 'the really smart and talented kids.'

See you next month.

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