

The Time Has Come

Over the past several decades, the memberships of physicians' organizations such as ours have experienced a downward trend. Young physicians have shown little interest in joining because they consider these organizations either as irrelevant, as non-responsive to their needs, or as "old boys' clubs" and thus a waste of money and time. In some instances, these views are not without some merit.

Clearly, the needs of young physicians starting out in practice usually unencumbered by any significant business savvy, are quite different from those of the established practitioner who gathered his or her business knowledge during relatively easier economic times.

Never has the environment in which we practice our art and science been more difficult, and never before have we been as beleaguered by, and confronted with external influences all of which tear at us and distract us from our true mission, the care of our patients. Not only must we keep up with multiple and rapid advances in the medical sciences, but we are inundated with demands on our time and attention by HMOs, PPOs, Stark Laws, Medicare Fraud and Abuse Laws, HIPAA regulations and a myriad of others. Our once indomitable spirit of individuality has not served us well. By allowing us to be divided, we are conquered.

The time has come for us to stand together, not as a union posed to strike, but as the highly trained professionals that we are, with the aim to bring order into the chaos in which we now exist. For this reason, it is essential that we look at the needs of those physicians that have failed to join us, whatever their reasons may be. We should be proactive and provide tangible assistance to newcomers, be it in helping to set up a practice, to learn to code, to find competent office staff or to learn the ins and outs of healthcare contracting. Nothing in our medical school curricula ever prepared us for those aspects of the practice of medicine.

Would it not make sense to approach the legislature to enact laws that prohibit some of the inappropriate business practices perpetrated by Third Party payers? In what other business do you find contracts that can be amended by one side only, especially when it comes to fee schedules? What other contracts have gag clauses in them? California has already passed legislation in this area, and we should do the same. If we stand together in a professional manner, legislators will listen and act. But in order to stand together we must attract many more of our colleagues than we have thus far. I believe that it is high time to reach out with meaningful programs and approaches to demonstrate our willingness to be a part of the solution.

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