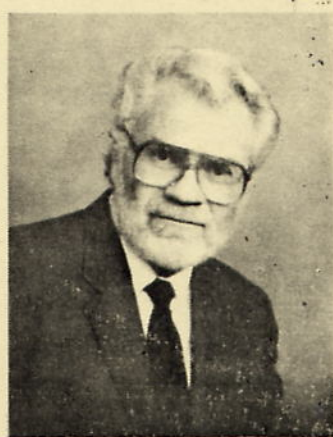


# As I See It



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Workers Compensation laws were enacted to establish and regulate the concept that a person injured while working is entitled to medical care and has paid for it with his labor. Theoretically, insurance companies are brokers who administer premiums collected from employers and insure that injured parties receive compensation.

Currently, the Workers Compensation system is riddled with problems. Costs are rising astronomically, and waste is so phenomenal that some companies are interested in maintaining the inefficient *status quo* only to avoid that final wave that will topple the structure. No part of the system is blameless, and all can make gainful contributions to its alteration.

The mammoth structure which has evolved with its ponderous wheels of paper handling and adjudication largely ignores the human needs of the injured worker.

The medical community, next to the patient, is closest to the problem. It is to us as physicians that the patient turns for what he most desires. Workers Compensation care may be legislated and adjudicated, but we deliver it.

There are among us, physicians who practice predominantly in Workers Compensation, guided exclusively by the profit motive. To such a doctor, the patient is a commodity and the doctor deals in volume. Little time is spent with the patient, but x-rays (often unnecessary and of poor quality) and "physical therapy" are extravagantly ordered and billed. The cost of these two torrential leaks from the finite financial reservoir of the system could amount

to millions of dollars in California alone. Yet, *there is no system of retrospective, prospective, introspective or any other form of quality audit in the entire system!* Overall medical expenses are audited, however.

Some physicians have chosen sides. They are employed by agents of the worker or the defense. Their reports are as predictable as their letterheads. Some are whores. Some evolved over time because of the propensity of their practice; the system encourages it.

The ethical among us recognize this. We recognize that the issue is not whether an adjudicated Workers Compensation system is necessary and will continue. It will. The issue, *our issue*, is what can be done to improve the delivery of medical care which was lost while the institution that developed to offer it overgrew the patient and his needs.

I understand that some individual insurance companies are actively engaged in attempting to find solutions for this problem. However, they are not doctors; they can touch the problem only peripherally. The Workers Compensation Institute is merely an advisory body.

The problems within Workers Compensation practice now are horrendous. It is not a problem you would call "easy" or an issue you could call "safe." There are a number of avenues toward a remedy that may be pursued. Some will re-

quire cooperative action, but others clearly remain our responsibility as physicians.

I offer some initial recommendations: Establish a forum at LACMA where representatives of insurance companies, employers, unions, attorneys, legislators and physicians can meet. Involve the executives of the companies because they are the least-informed. Unless another way can be found, promote legislation to ensure that diagnostic radiology is quality-controlled, with retrospective audits where payment is based on need and technical competence. Do not pay for physical therapy unless it is provided by certified, trained personnel. The provision of physical therapy and the current schedule of payment demand re-examination. If necessary, advise legislation concerning the weighting of reports by physicians with vested interests. Cooperate in the development of training standards of claims examiners by providing physician assistance if possible.

There is no area within the Workers Compensation services where some segment does not exploit the system. But I am convinced — when I see in consultation too many patients who are hostile or depressed or in pain, because they have been uninformed, unsupported, and in some cases unfortunately, maltreated — that the system needs help. We must provide it. ■

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