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No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

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No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

Pro bono practices in health care aim to address health disparities between individuals in our society, both locally and globally, by providing services to those who might not otherwise receive medical attention. Pro bono practices are vital to communities throughout, and should be implemented more; however there are several drawbacks that make doing so dreadfully difficult. Various health care professions, from physical therapy to nursing, share this outlook and value altruistic teamwork of practitioners in ensuring social justice.

Several people are faced with the struggle of not being able to utilize health care services due to financial reasons. Others simply do not even have access, especially those in rural, isolated areas of the world. To these underserved individuals, pro bono practices could be the only medical attention they receive; and in some cases it can even save lives. This remarkable crisis was explained well by Stan Brock, founder of Remote Area Medical, when he said that some people “might as well be on the moon for the access that they have to health care.” Thus, the fact that the underserved population has an opportunity to receive vital services is perhaps the biggest benefit of pro bono practices. For some, even a preventative screen or minimal medical education and intervention could be life saving.

For the health care professional providing the pro bono care, the moral and ethical satisfaction that accompanies volunteering to help the underserved can be incredibly rewarding. Most health care providers choose to enter the profession for the love of helping others and being able to make a direct impact on the overall wellbeing and human experience of an individual or population. For many, treating the underserved is an exceptionally life changing experience and can lead to positive changes in practice. It is for these reasons that professional health care organizations, such as the American Physical Therapy Association, advocate for members to

participate in pro bono practices. Pro bono can be extremely beneficial for both the patient and the provider.

With all of the benefits in mind, it is common for some to propose the solution that if every health care provider participated in pro bono services, then health disparities could be eliminated. While this may be true, there are several reasons why this is both impractical and difficult to do. From a business standpoint, pro bono care jeopardizes the value of the health service being provided. This is because often in health care, insurance reimbursement requires providers to demonstrate the skillful necessity of their practice. In a pro bono situation, the skill value is jeopardized because the provider is giving the impression that their services are not really worth the amount billed in the clinic. This affects the profession as a whole when trying to negotiate for higher reimbursement rates and contracts. It is also harmful if paying patients discover that others are receiving the same treatment as them for no cost as it can lead to a variety of issues. Some paying patients might argue it is unfair and press for their treatment to be pro bono.

Another, perhaps more apparent, drawback of pro bono practice is that it does require time and money, even when it is at no cost to the patient. This is always an obstacle for health care professionals to deal with, especially when pro bono is practiced in addition to full time clinical care. So many clinics are already struggling to stay afloat financially due to low reimbursement rates; and if no-cost care is provided to patients, the business might just sink. It seems as though the phrase, “no good deed goes unpunished” is appropriate to use when discussing pro bono practices at times, and especially in situations like this. A clinician might see the tremendous benefits of pro bono practices, but be held back on implementing them due to the burdens that accompany the practice. There is also a wide realm of potential legal risks

surrounding pro bono practices. The risks vary based on the services provided, but there are certainly legalities and guidelines for conducting pro bono health care.

Initially, it seems as though pro bono care is beneficial for all parties involved and is the solution many have been looking for to this crisis of medically underserved populations. However, under closer examination, it is obvious that there are several obstacles and factors that make implementing pro bono practices very difficult and impractical to do. The mission and intentions of pro bono practice are extremely valuable to reaching the goals of health care; but there needs to be a middle ground between following the ambition and passion of wanting to help serve those in need, and the business aspect of protecting the profession. If this middle ground were to be discovered and implemented, the health care goal of eliminating health disparities globally might be achieved.

Overall, pro bono practices make a tremendous impact on both the patient and provider. The providers are able to directly see the need for service, as well as the influence they can make; while the patients are exposed to the world of health care and can receive life changing treatments. Pro bono is vital to bridging the gap of health disparities in populations around the world because it places the issue on the forefront of minds and actively takes strides toward a solution. Perhaps one day, that happy balance between the pros and cons of pro bono practice will be found and professionals will act more on the core values instilled in them by their profession and get involved in changing the world, one person at a time. It will be then, that this good deed will not be punished, but simply rather is that, a good deed.