

HAVE WE FORSAKEN OUR COLLEAGES

When I was in active practice I made certain that I did not charge colleagues, their spouses, nor their children. The favour was reciprocated by our specialist colleagues. In an article in the BMJ it stated that the lack of a charge “cements relationships and shows that the medical profession, unlike some other professions, refuses to bow to outside pressure to make it more financially aware and money driven..... Charging between professional colleagues has been regarded as undignified, unpleasant, and unseemly.” BMJ 1994;309:1318

In chatting to a retired GP over the Christmas recess, I was horrified to hear how he and his spouse had been treated by our younger specialist colleagues, when they needed specialised medical attention over the past 2 years.

Being a life- long member of a medical aid, he thought that he was immune from the ravages of hyper billing which has infiltrated large sectors of the specialist fraternity. He was however comforted in the (mistaken) thought that during his active years of practice, he had supported and helped to build the medical fraternity. Many of the now multiman practices grew out of the amalgamations of solo and smaller surgical, medical, psychiatric, radiology and pathology practices, in the area where he had practiced for over 40 years.

It seems that the lack of acknowledgement of his previous status in the medical community was initially ignored by the reception staff who clearly instructed him to bring R 2000.00 cash with him for the first consultation, as “ Doctor does not work with medical aids”. Readers of Qualicare news will clearly identify with the Qualicare motto : “Cash is King!”, so I cannot fault the logic, however this was never intended to be used when treating colleagues. The lack of recognition was however not reversed by the specialist himself, who happened to be on the same medical aid as the retired practitioner, but nevertheless charged him 300% of the benefit scale! I am not for a moment defending the unrealistic medical aid tariffs, but merely use this example to prove my point.

An even bigger shock awaited him when hospitals which he had faithfully supported, and where he had personally done his lumps, bumps, tonsillectomies and D and Cs, requested a deposit of tens of thousands of Rand, when an admission was required, and where there was a delay with the medical aid authorisation.

I am even aware of elderly widows of medical professionals who have had to sell their homes to pay medical and hospital bills after their doctor spouse had died, and left significant unpaid medical bills!

Personally, most of my specialist colleagues do not charge me or my medical aid a cent, as they know that the day to day savings is so low, that it is tantamount to charging me cash. I remain deeply appreciative of these gestures of goodwill , however the same courtesy and recognition should be offered to the retired practitioner , whose name is no longer remembered as someone with a wider known public persona.

What has happened to the unwritten law that medical colleagues do not charge colleagues?

In the rough and tumble of acquiring more Porches and Land-Rovers, holiday homes on Mediterranean islands, and hard assets, it seems that some our newer up and coming specialists are losing their moral compass? Maybe it's all our own fault, in that we possibly did not inculcate medical ethics, and reciprocity into the final year medical classes over the past 10 years.

Let's not forget the meaning of :

- Pro bono (Latin phrase for professional work undertaken voluntarily and without payment, a service that uses the specific skills of professionals to provide services to those who are unable to afford them)
- Pro Deo (literally "For God"),and
- Pro Amico (for a friend)

Maybe I'm old fashioned, maybe the costs of practice has made it difficult not to charge a colleague, but then, AT LEAST, settle for what your retired colleague's medical aid offers as payment, and don't hound him for the balance.

Our proud profession prides itself on dignity, recognition of collegiality, and respect of our elders.

Don't let's lose it to 20th century greed!

Non ego, sed gratia Dei processit" (There but for the grace of God , go I)

Tony Behrman and the IPAF team