

Medical Jousting: The no-win conundrum for everyone

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Incident 1*:

This happened in the year 2006. Dr. Bhavani Kumar entered the hospital where he had been practicing for over a decade. In the lobby a lady by name Archana known to him for years, the daughter of one of his patients Mr. Krishnaswamy appeared distressed. Dr. Bhavani Kumar enquired with her: "How is your father?" The immediate spontaneous angry reaction from her shocked him: "You should have known better! My father is in the I.C.U. due to your negligence and incompetence." (I have paraphrased her words here but you get the message!)

Three days earlier this elderly gentleman, Mr. Krishnaswamy had visited Dr. BhavaniKumar's clinic with minor injuries to his face after a two-wheeler had hit him. Dr. Bhavani Kumar had treated him conservatively, referred him to a neurologist, and after the latter's clearance had discharged the patient. As events turned out, Mr. Krishnaswamy had been brought back to the hospital after three days with a history of fever and fatigue. The Physician who was consulted had made a comment to the effect of: "Had he been admitted at the first visit his condition would have been much better" and that the patient had developed "septicemia". It's worthwhile noting that the patient had exhibited no signs of septicemia. He was discharged from the hospital in 48 hours. However the patient Mr. Krishnaswamy's family refused to discuss with or speak to Dr. Bhavani Kumar ever after.

Dr. Bhavani Kumar was not aware if the Physician in the hospital had made these comments inadvertently or intentionally or if there was even the possibility that the suffering family had twisted his words. Dr. Bhavani Kumar has expressed his anguish at this turn of events and has admitted to being unable to recover from the psychological impact and heartburn this has caused him all these years. However

he decided not to confront the physician on this matter and has kept his feelings to himself.

Incident 2*:

A very reputed orthopedic surgeon, a friend of mine, Dr. Praveen walked into my clinic one day, visibly upset and distraught. He had conducted a surgery on a patient with a bad Humerus fracture a few weeks earlier. The patient's family had stormed into his clinic and thrown up tantrums, accusing him of negligence as there was delayed healing of the surgical wound. They had spoken to another surgeon who had convinced them that he had insider knowledge that the orthopedic surgeon was using "faulty techniques of Instrument sterilization".

These are some instances where a professional's disparaging and condescending comments about a colleague, be it casual, deliberate or unintentional could lead to severe misinterpretation, misunderstanding and consequential distress for the patient as well as for the person targeted.

Making derogatory remarks on a co-worker or colleague is termed 'Jousting'. Indulging in bad-mouthing or criticizing and passing disrespectful statements is also 'Jousting'. And when this is done by a medical professional aimed at another it is specifically termed as 'Doctor jousting'² or 'Medical jousting.'

Comments that can lead to problems can appear to be as trivial or as insignificant as:

- "Did the doctor not conduct a thorough examination?"
- "Did he prescribe you these strong dosages of medicines?"
- "Did he not take multiple X-rays?"
- "Did the doctor consult a cardiologist before performing surgery?"

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- “Did he explain the risks to you before the operation was done?”.

The dangerous effects of medical jousting can be all-encompassing:

- Social and Psychological: Loss of confidence in practice for the doctor, and lack of faith in the doctor for the patient. Reputations can be destroyed.
- Legal: Resorting to malpractice suits against the doctor by the patients.

It is very unfortunate that doctors being in this sensitive profession, largely believed to be a 'Noble Profession' resort to or indulge in such acts either due to jealousy or callousness. In trying to impress their clients or their relatives such acts go against the very ethics to which they have subscribed to. Hurting one's own professional colleague not only damages the reputation of the doctors involved, it can bring down the profession itself in the eyes of the common man in general. It is up to the doctors themselves to keep up the morale by condemning such acts by colleagues.

It would not be inappropriate to quote two of the lines in the Declaration of Geneva³ (Physician's Oath) which was itself intended as a revision of the Hippocratic Oath:

I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity.

My colleagues will be sisters and brothers

There is a serious side-effect to medical jousting, and doctors may not think through the repercussions of it when they make adverse comments about another doctor. A patient could very well misunderstand, and thereafter misquote and distort your statements and cause irreparable damage to the doctor involved in the conversation as well as the doctor targeted. The doctor indulging in the conversation may never get the opportunity to clarify what he or she said in the first place. Moreover a doctor making uncharitable comments about another doctor may well be feeding the evil intentions of a plaintiff looking for every opportunity to sue the doctor who did the initial diagnosis and treatment. This could land both the doctors in a legal battle with the patient, and may cost them a lumpsum amount, not to mention the mental stress of having to fight the courts even as you are trying to earn enough money to make both ends meet.

Hence it is advisable that doctors take extra care to avoid comments about a colleague. Even where

he has formed an opinion that a mistake had been done earlier it is to be discussed in a proper forum. Or the simplest way is to keep one's mouth shut. One might have studied Shubhashitani (words of wisdom) in schools:

Satyam Bruyat Priyam Bruyat Na
Bruyat Satyam priyam
Priyam Cha
Namrutam Bruyat Esha Dharmah Sanathanah....
Sri Shankaracharya.⁴

"Speak truth in such a way that it should be pleasing to others. Never speak truth which is unpleasant to others. Never speak untruth, which might be pleasant. This is the path of eternal morality, sanatana dharma".

To reiterate the above point, if you indulge in the dishonest and unethical, unprofessional practice of insinuating another professional, the plaintiff's attorney could very well use your claims as a setting ground to bring both of you to court. You will be forced to provide evidence free of cost (free to the plaintiff, that is) and you will unwittingly be the co-defendant in the court trial. It could be days, weeks or even months that you need to attend court, and the consequent draining of your time that could have been well spent taking care of other patients. Word gets around very fast, sooner than you could imagine and you could find yourself socially ostracized by the community and society.

So what's the moral of the story?

The next occasion a patient approaches you with a health complication after having visited another doctor, take a step back, exercise caution, think rationally and act in a sensible manner before you decide on the next course of action for the patient. No matter what opinions you form from whatever the patient tells you, remember to never ever make any insensitive remarks about the treatment the patient has been through. Put your mind to what needs to be done, in the interests of the patient and yourself, and you will be taking that one additional step towards making this world a better place to live.

And everyone will be the wiser and happier for it.

*Please note:- All names used in this write-up have been changed to protect privacy and safer place for doctors to live.

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