

Abuse of Physicians: Battered Physician Syndrome

Kristin S. Held, M.D.

We physicians devote our lives to serving others. We endure rites of passage known to a rare few. We work undeterred for the good of each individual patient, together in trust, making many personal sacrifices by choice. I have had utmost respect for my colleagues, unified in the Oath of Hippocrates, equipped with hard-earned knowledge, skills, wisdom, and experience to do what was once unfathomable.

Until now.

External philosophical and political forces are preying on our intrinsic, enduring calling to serve others. These forces intentionally manipulate, extort, and oppress us as a means to achieve fundamental transformation of the United States of America. These forces are succeeding, using predictable tactics including creating crises and dividing us, using us in opposition to each other. We are told that the quality of medicine we are providing is bad, that we are bad, and that government must fix our patients, our profession, and us.

We have been lied about, lied to, denigrated, and subjected to abusive measures resulting in a growing phenomenon that could rightly be called "battered physicians syndrome." This syndrome is deadly for physicians, patients, the profession of medicine, and individual liberty. It is the physician's responsibility to recognize and develop resistance to this syndrome.

Battered spouse syndrome is defined as "a pattern of signs and symptoms, such as fear and a perceived inability to escape, appearing in those who are physically and mentally abused over an extended period by a spouse or dominant individual."

Battered physician syndrome could be defined similarly as "a pattern of signs and symptoms, such as fear and a perceived inability to escape, appearing in doctors who are physically and mentally abused over an extended period of time by demands and constraints of their profession or dominant individuals and groups seeking to malign and control them."

Under the expanding umbrella of government-run medicine in an entrenched entitlement state, physicians are barraged with constant undeserved defamation and increasingly impossible physical, regulatory, and financial demands. Verbal and nonverbal threats of physical, financial, legal, and professional harm, if not ruin, are constantly unleashed on us by the federal government's executive branch through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Department of Justice, the IRS, and more. Groups like AMA, our specialty societies, big hospital groups, big pharma, big insurance, and other special interests,

emboldened and enabled by a biased, weak press, aid and abet annihilation of American medicine. This constant mistreatment causes physicians to increasingly complain of symptoms consistent with chronic physical and emotional abuse. I see this in my physician patients, my physician friends, and my physician family members. I see this in myself.

Physicians show signs of physical assault, including overt manifestations of sleep deprivation, malnourishment, and lack of exercise. Many suffer with actual physical disease such as cancer, high blood pressure, and stress-related conditions. Signs of depression are common. Physician burnout and a stunning physician suicide rate are only recently acknowledged by our peers.¹

In spite of this, many physicians continue to comply with the oppressors' usurious demands, whether it be from fear of losing certification, licensure, patients, income, or the right to practice our trade at all, or from the feeling of being trapped with no other way out to care for our patients and provide for our families. Other physicians are leaving the profession, and worse, they are discouraging the best and brightest from pursuing careers in medicine.

History

Government-run medicine took off running in the U.S. with the birth of Medicare 50 years ago. The Medicare promise of 1965 bears little resemblance to Medicare today. Flashback to 1965, Section 1801, Medicare Act:

Nothing in this title shall be construed to authorize any federal officer or employee to exercise any supervision or control over the practice of medicine, or the manner in which medical services are provided, or over the selection, tenure, or compensation of any institution, agency, or person providing health care services....

Clearly the government has broken every word of this section's promise.

Five years ago the Democratic Party alone signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) or "ObamaCare." American medicine today is barely recognizable. ObamaCare forces physicians to betray our patients, violate the Oath of Hippocrates, and serve the government hand that pays us. ObamaCare violates government's promise not to interfere with the practice of medicine and physicians' ability to care for patients that was made when Medicare became law.

On April 16, President Obama signed into law H.R. 2, the Medicare and CHIP Reauthorization Act, known as

MACRA. This law further deconstructs the private practice of medicine and destroys physicians' autonomy to practice patient-centered medicine. Government bureaucrats and committees will call the shots for Medicare patients. The law creates Alternative Payment Models (APMs) and a Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS), which require physicians to follow a government rubric on which we will be rated in grade-school fashion. Physicians, now defined as "eligible providers," will get grades from 0-100 as determined by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

The grade for doing what the Secretary prescribes is called the Composite Performance Score. The score is publicly posted on CMS's Physician Compare website, and the HHS secretary assigns each physician a payment adjustment factor based on this score. The payment adjustment factor will be positive, 0, or negative. Based on how well a doctor "performs" for the secretary, the pay could be adjusted 9.9% up or 9% down, meaning the Secretary's most compliant doctors will be paid 19% more than those who don't perfectly make her wishes our commands.

What will doctors put up with, and what will we do or not do for patients in order to be paid 19% more than those whom government deems doctors of lesser quality, and to avoid public humiliation on the government website? This is chronic and continued abuse taken to a higher, institutionalized level.

Etiology

That battered physicians syndrome shares features with battered spouse syndrome suggests the question: Is the propagation of this phenomenon in medicine related to the growing number of women in medicine? Or is it simply the result of the government-driven empowerment and growth of abusive dominators in the form of a burgeoning bureaucracy?

The Association of American Medical Colleges' report, "The State of Women in Academic Medicine: The Pipeline and Pathways to Leadership, 2013-2014,"² states that when Medicare was passed, the percentage of women medical school graduates was a mere 6.9%. Over the next 40 years, women entered medicine in droves, and by academic year 2005-2006, the percentage of women students enrolled in medical schools peaked at 48.6%.

Concurrent with the rise of women physicians, from 1970 to 2009, U.S. healthcare spending exploded by 2,300% per capita. "The Chart That Could Undo the Healthcare System: Skyrocketing Costs are Being Driven by Bureaucracy,"³ bears reckoning. While the number of physicians increased by 300%, the number of administrators leaped by 3,000% since the inception of Medicare and escalating government involvement in medicine. Such bureaucratic waste under increasing government control is inexcusable.

MACRA was signed into law under the pretense of

fixing the dysfunctional way government pays, penalizes, and rewards doctors. In reality, the law serves to further our central planners' goals of wealth redistribution, central control of a sixth of our nation's economy, and totalitarian control over the profession of medicine, which now happens to be composed of a significant proportion of women physicians. This is out of control. How did this happen on our watch?

Are women more likely to submit to bureaucratic, authoritarian domination, thus allowing it to proliferate unrestrained in a dark, deafening silence until it's too late? Or are we, the physicians of the ObamaCare-Doc Fix-MACRA Era, men and women alike, trapped in an insidious, pathological relationship as we seek to please authority and serve others, taking whatever they dish out just to survive, self-destructed, deceived, and dominated by government and special interests?

Remedy

Just as many spouses stay in the abusive marriage, will doctors stay in this abusive relationship? We must end this cycle before it ends us. We should apply to battered physicians the lessons learned from battered spouses. Physicians must move beyond the stages of denial and guilt to those of enlightenment and responsibility. This abuse is happening. We must make a choice; we can stay forever trapped in this dysfunctional system, enabling and feeding it, or we can say "no more" and get out.

It is not easy. We will have to forge new paths and start over from scratch, but we can do it right this time for the good of our patients, our profession, our nation, and our souls. They can take away everything, but our minds and hearts they cannot steal. Our skills, knowledge, experience, and code of ethics they cannot take away. They do not possess what they peddle to our patients. We must opt out of government-run medicine. It is time to take responsibility. It's our choice. Make it.

Kristin S. Held, M.D., is a board-certified ophthalmologist who practices in Texas. She is co-founder and co-director of American Doctors4Truth. Contact: kksheld@aol.com.

REFERENCES

- 1 Wible PL. Physician suicide 101: secrets, lies, and solutions. *Medscape*, Nov 13, 2015. Available at: www.medscape.com/viewarticle/834434. Accessed Aug 20, 2015.
- 2 Association of American Medical Colleges. The State of Women in Academic Medicine: The Pipeline and Pathways to Leadership, 2013-2014. Available at: <https://www.aamc.org/members/gwims/statistics/>. Accessed Aug 20, 2015.
- 3 Borders M. The Chart That Could Undo the Healthcare System: Skyrocketing Costs are Being Driven by Bureaucracy. Foundation for Economic Education; May 29, 2015. Available at: <http://drrichwier.com/2015/05/03/the-chart-that-could-undo-the-healthcare-system-skyrocketing-costs-are-being-driven-by-bureaucracy/>. Accessed Aug 20, 2015.