To the Editor:

Although belatedly, I have just finished reading the editorial in the August 2002 issue of Orthopedics (25[8]:792). You make several excellent points; however, the final paragraph where you state that unethical relationships between industry and physicians can only exist through the willing participation of physicians says it all.

Unethical behavior is but one of the major problems affecting not only orthopedics, but our entire health-care delivery system. That patient/physician relationship needs to be restored to the high level of trust that existed before managed care began its hopeless and unwelcome intrusion into an industry it has exhibited countless times it knows nothing about.

First, some apparently forgotten facts require restating. The most significant and most overlooked fact is that physicians are health care. Those of us privileged to work in this unique industry, which is by no stretch of the definition a business, are here only by the grace of the physicians. Therefore, regardless of the particular position we might hold in this industry, the level of excellence to which that position is performed is secondary to the attention and support we must continuously provide the physicians. Our continuous attention and support of the physicians is essential for them to continue to provide the high standard of care their patients expect. Currently, far too many of us in health care have forgotten that it is the highest standard of care provided to the patients that makes us successful, and not our accumulation of wealth by focusing on profits and increased market share.

I previously worked as a physician assistant for a neurosurgeon and on many occasions in the emergency room provided direct care to injured patients. I can understand the awesome responsibility of the physicians for the well being of a patient. The patient/physician relationship represents man’s greatest accomplishment and is based solely on trust. A person seeking medical care is the ultimate uninformed consumer, yet he can place his future well being and often his very life into the hands of a physician he has likely just met for the first time, before agreeing to treatment methods he likely knows nothing about nor understands. This relationship built solely on trust is the very foundation of health-care delivery, and any breach of that trust between the patient and his physician jeopardizes the relationship and our entire health-care delivery system.

Currently, that relationship is in grave danger primarily due to whomever decided the overall costs of the world’s highest standard of health care was too high and health care required reform to reduce costs. Since managed care and the reform of health care have come so perilously close to destroying the very foundation of our health-care delivery system, I feel compelled to point out the insanity and hopelessness of this reform while it is not too late to stop the destruction.

Managed care’s method for achieving its goal of reducing the overall costs of health care by restricting physicians’ choices of initial treatment methods exhibits managed care’s lack of understanding. This method ensures that overall costs increase. Costs are not part of the deciding factors physicians are highly trained to use for determining the best possible treatment method for their patients. The treatment that works the best is the best. Business principles used by managed care officials are worthless in an industry where the well being of patients is at risk.

Physicians are trained to practice medicine only one way. A physician is trained to view and treat each patient as his most important patient in meeting his sacred obligation to the patient/physician relationship. That obligation is to only ever recommend first the best possible treatment method for his patient’s medical condition. That process requires a physician to first accept a person as a patient and to then examine and order only the tests necessary for determining as definitive a diagnosis as he possibly can. Once the diagnosis has been definitively made the physician must use his experience, all known published information regarding his patient’s diagnosis, his accumulation of information from the numerous medical conferences and seminars he is obligated to attend, and any and all other sources of information available to him, and from this mountain of information to determine the best possible treatment method as his first recommendation to his patient. Placing even one iota of restriction on a physician and his ability to meet his sacred obligation to his patient violates the trust his patient placed in his physician.

Until the managed care officials can completely understand the scope of the patient/physician relationship and the physician’s enormous responsibility to his patient while the patient has entrusted his very life to his physician’s ability to meet that obligation, no further reform should be allowed. Unless of course, managed care officials are willing to assume
The physician’s responsibility and his liability of failing to meet his obligation. Therein lies the crux of the problem. Managed care officials have no responsibility or liability for their actions.

Health care has two built-in cost control systems. The first cost control is, it has been shown time and time again that patients receiving the best possible treatments initially have significantly reduced complications compared to patients receiving less than the best treatments who initially have significantly higher complication rates. Complications requiring revisions and additional treatments are much higher in costs than any of the most expensive initial treatments, and greatly increase the overall cost of health care. Higher complication rates also diminish the patient’s trust in his physician and tend to result in more lawsuits and higher malpractice premiums for all physicians. Correct me if I missed something but, increased overall costs of health care, diminished trust patients have in their physicians, and jeopardizing the foundation of our health-care system, plus the increase in lawsuits and increased malpractice premiums, all appear to be diametrically opposed to the original goal of managed care reform being to reduce the overall costs of health care.

The second cost control system is, it should be the choice of Americans as individuals whether the costs of health care are too high and if they are willing to risk reduced care and possible loss of life to save money.

Physicians should set a date in the near future and announce that on that date only emergency services will be available as the remaining physicians cannot come to work until they are assured they can meet their sacred obligation to their patients. Force the managed care officials to assume responsibility for their actions and let them explain to patients what they did to cause the physicians to stand up for their patients and refuse to come to work, until the disaster managed care has created has been cleaned up. Cleaned up, meaning of course, getting rid of the problem and insisting the next reformers be allowed to assume the responsibility and legal liability for any further changes they might want to make.

Let the business people have their Enrons, World Coms, and the other road kill on the business superhighway to riches. Kill is not an appropriate method of providing health care as it is a completely acceptable method for getting rich in the business world.

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