

# common SENSE



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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Howard Blumstein, MD FAAEM

I have a series of rules that I like to apply in the ED. I share them with my residents, who are very good at ignoring them. The rules are at once insightful, funny, condescending and truthful. Rule number four is "Never ask 'why'; you will never get a satisfactory answer." Think about it next time you are tempted to ask a patient why they came to your busy ED with some ridiculous, trivial problem. In this President's Message, I am going to violate rule four.

In my years of service to AAEM, I have had the opportunity to meet many emergency docs. I ask them about their working conditions and their employers; I hear horror stories about how they are fired, manipulated, underpaid and abused. A typical story sounds like this "Our boss is such a jerk. He barely works one shift a week, never works a night shift, doesn't do anything about the terrible conditions in the ER, takes full credit for keeping the ER running and – based on his house – he must make twice as much as we are..."

So, here's my question: Why do we emergency docs put up with this crap?

Many of us don't. By virtue of the fact that you are reading this, you are probably an AAEM member. As such, you have set yourself apart from most of our peers as being particularly aware and concerned about issues such as professional integrity, working conditions, job security and pay. You are much more likely to understand that most contract holders, big and small, do not care about the doctors working for them. Their sole concerns are making money and protecting those contracts. And so, as an AAEM member, I bet you are less likely to work for such a contract holder.

But why do so many of our peers essentially go to contract holders and say "Come on, Mr. Corporate Boss, give me a job where you underpay me, interfere with my patient care, and give me fewer employment rights than the janitor who empties the trash in my ER?"

I have heard many emergency docs complain that reimbursement for their services is unfair. They are right. We treat far more uninsured and underinsured patients than any other specialty. We work in the only health care setting where doctors are mandated to provide free care. Insurers hatch countless schemes designed to justify reduced payments or to deny payment entirely. And it will only get worse.

So why do so many of our colleagues compound that unfairness by allowing business people to siphon off tens of thousands of dollars of their professional fees?

The explanation I've heard is that some emergency docs "choose" to avoid the headaches of maintaining a business. They allow someone else to handle all the business issues for them and are willing to pay additional money for that service.

This argument is pure manure. AAEM has well documented estimates that contract management companies siphon \$50-75K of profit from each emergency doc working for them. That is after all operating expenses. A group of emergency docs could easily hire a professional management service to handle their business operations and keep the bulk of the money that is currently going into the deep pockets of their bosses. It is a secret the suits don't want you to know, which is why they work so hard to keep doctors from seeing how much money is collected for their professional services.

So again I ask, why would a group of presumably intelligent emergency docs fail to organize into a cohesive, independent unit and take control of their own operations, increasing their income by tens of thousands of dollars?

As rule number four predicts, I have never gotten a satisfactory answer to these questions. I get lots of blank stares. I have plenty of young docs tell me "Well, this hospital is in an ideal location for me and my growing family..." I get plenty of mumbling about not wanting to be a troublemaker. Many of our peers feel they have no choice. Nothing satisfactory.

I do not expect a satisfactory answer to emerge until the leadership of our specialty convinces a critical mass of our colleagues to take control of their own professional futures. Perhaps someday...

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