

## THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A COAL MINER

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What are some of the reputed advantages of being a physician? Surely the fact that physicians as a group are among the highest earners in the country is a prime consideration. It would, however, not only be wrong but also insulting to assume that this is the only consideration.

Physicians also enjoy the respect, and sometimes the admiration of patients and their families. Their work is non-repetitious and frequently outright exciting. They have many opportunities to relate meaningfully to other human beings.

Above all this; the practice of medicine affords the physician opportunities for exercising independent judgement, and for making important decisions affecting his own life and the lives of his patients. Indeed, the chance to conduct one's own life and the freedom to make decisions according to one's best judgement is a rare and precious situation in modern society. Some would even consider these aspects as being the most important features of life as a physician, more important than all others. Such opportunities place a special responsibility on doctors: To regard their profession as a calling and to treat the trust vested in them respectfully at all times.

Such statements are frequently misinterpreted, willfully or innocently, to mean that physicians have no right, therefore, to take firm or even extreme stands that are contrary to the wishes of some segments of the population. With the increasing

role played by third party payers, insurance companies and government are justly demanding some accounting for what they are paying. It is unreasonable to charge for services without giving third parties some reports about the nature of such charges. It is equally unrealistic to expect such third parties to exercise restraint as they attempt to control costs and to maximize benefits. This, basically, is the current state of affairs in Medicine. Bureaucratic infringements on physicians' rights are increasing in number and scope, and the areas of independence for the physician's judgement are steadily shrinking in size.

It is obvious even without attributing malice to third parties that their political muscle is by far stronger than that of individual physicians and even of most medical organizations. Physicians are often politically naive, and they have been on the retreat for years. The administrative complexities of the practice of medicine have grown and have turned many physicians into busy executives. In the confrontation with third party payers the physicians of this country have consistently been the losers.

A recent editorial in this Bulletin suggested that the day may come when physicians might wish to resort to the use of such extreme measures as strike, boycott and refusal to work as means for the preservation of their legitimate rights and the standards of Medicine. While many recognized that such measures might be necessary, others claimed that such plain talk would sully the hallowed image of the physician as a good healer, solely concerned with the welfare of his patients.

Such utopian picture of the physician is unrealistic and does not fit the conditions of this age. Our independent judgements are steadily being infringed upon and our freedom to make our own decisions is steadily being narrowed. Since

a special responsibility rests upon our professional shoulders we must be most careful to take extreme measures only in extreme situations. Those who state that a physician's only duty is to others are playing into the collective guilt of large segments within our profession. But legislators in Washington and elsewhere must not forget that in reality physicians, too, have the right to lay down their instruments and boldly say: No more.

It was indeed refreshing to see how each individual coal miner across the country had an opportunity to contribute his individual voice to the collective decision of accepting or rejecting the contract that was negotiated for him by the union leadership. This is the essence of Democracy and punishable in both Fascist and Communist regimes. Even the lowliest coal miner in a distant and isolated corner must have sensed the dignity and power of his position as he cast a yes or no vote that would directly and immediately affect his own life and the economy of the country.

Such dignity and power were inherent in the practice of medicine in the past. They are clearly being stripped off physicians now, as the encroachment of bureaucratic controls increases. Unless we effectively resist this trend we would, in effect, become part of the technocracy.

Physicians will probably continue in any event to be among the highest earners in the population, but this will not be sufficient enough a prize to draw the best students into medicine. If Medicine is allowed to become a profession of skilled technicians, controlled by governmental edicts and insurance companies' regulations it would surely lower the standards of practice to the detriment of all.