

Medical-Legal Work Improves Physician Skills

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“My work as forensic psychiatrist has made me a much better clinician, in my estimation, for the following reasons:

Physicians who do medical-legal work report that this helps them become better treating physicians. Each and every physician surveyed by the authors report that for many reasons doing medical-legal work exposes them to many treatment plans, the latest medications and modalities, and is the most effective continuing medical education for physicians to help keep their skills current and improve them.

The physicians explain in their own words how this work makes them better treating doctors.

“It absolutely does make you a better physician. It forces you to do research and a lot of reading.”

“Exposure to clinical issues that I do not usually see in practice. More rare disease entities. Good learning.

Learning about common errors that doctors make in cognition, communication, documentation. The more I see them in others, the less likely I am to make these mistakes myself.

Learning more of the limits of technology that cannot replace clinical knowledge and judgment.

Reaffirming the primacy of the doctor-patient relationship. Learning to never lose patience with a patient or to treat any patient or family member in an offhand manner, no matter how frustrating that can be sometimes.”

“It forces me to think more analytically.

Helps me to see events and people from varied perspectives. This includes thinking about other ways to help their patients.

Makes me read in a focused way—yet comprehensively on a specific topic.

Gives me more insight into how my colleagues think and operate within my area of expertise and new information about treatment I was unaware of.

Allows me to compare their way of thinking to that of other talented (though not always talented) expert clinicians.

Helps me to focus on the implications of their treatments.”

“Allows me to look at the treatment of a patient from beginning to end, with all of the medical records available.”

“Permits me to spend the time to analyze in an in-depth fashion what was done correctly and incorrectly in a plan of treatment.”

“Reviewing medical files makes me stay current with the large volume of medical literature.”

I am more thorough in my history taking, indeed I spend more time gathering a much broader history than earlier in my career. I am more aware and concern to evaluate for non-psychiatric, i.e., physical, causes for reported symptoms. For example, I picked up lupus, brain tumor, etc. I communicate with other physicians and health care providers more frequently. I bring in family members for interviews. If a patient does not improve in a pre-determined period of time I reevaluate my diagnosis. I ask and review past records and records from other physicians. I check blood levels of medications to establish compliance. I check blood and urine toxicology much more frequently. I order brain CAT scans, MRI, EEG more frequently. I consult with other physicians. I am more aware of secondary gain and other non-medical motivations. I thoroughly question any inconsistencies and I am no longer shy about it – I need to understand my patients. I am much better in documenting my findings, both positive and negative. I document my thinking religiously. I practice far less defensively because I go through differential diagnosis and establish priorities. I involve patients in decision making. I am very clear with boundaries and again not shy about it. I use psychological and neuropsychological testing. I review medical literature on case specific bases.”

“Allows MD to:

- *See how other MD's practice.*
- *See different ways to document.*
- *See common errors in practice.*
- *See new techniques in practice or technology.*
- *See a national standard of care or to see the local standard of care.*
- *See different types of record keeping and different forms/formats - paper vs. electronic.*
- *Get to know MD's PA's CNP's from around the country.*
- *Have a form of CME for their own knowledge/practice. Chart review is a form of CME.*
- *Provide a format for evaluating your own practice to make improvements.*
- *Identify areas of practice that you have not considered before - topics/techniques/questions. Ethics of Practice - evaluate decision making process of yourself and your peers/colleagues.”*

Conclusion

Physicians across the United States report that doing medical-legal work provides them with one of the best continuing medical education experiences available. These physicians use the experience gained to assist their patients and become better physicians.