Pediatric Psychiatry, and a Note on Malpractice

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As a sequel to last month’s issue devoted to the diagnosis of pediatric psychiatric disorders, this month’s issue is full of articles that emphasize the management of these conditions: anxiety disorders; autism spectrum disorders; disruptive behavior disorders; and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). All of these articles focus on the primary care provider for children. It is our goal to provide information written by experts in their fields, targeted not to the specialist, but to the primary care physician in particular.

DEFENSIVE MEDICINE

I wish to devote the bulk of this column to reviewing data from a very interesting paper published in The New England Journal of Medicine in August about malpractice risk by physician specialty. This report analyzed data from 1991 to 2005 for all physicians who were covered by a large nationwide physician-owned liability insurer (about 41,000 physicians and 234,000 physician-years of coverage), and assessed the data by physician specialty. Obviously, malpractice coverage is a topic that we all deal with. The data included both good news and bad news for pediatricians.

Each year, 7.4% of all physicians had a malpractice claim against them, and 1.6% had a claim that led to a payment. The good news is that the proportion of pediatricians with a claim was only 3.1%, the second lowest of the 24 specialties and one group of “others” who were analyzed. About 75% of the physicians in low-risk specialties (pediatrics, psychiatry, and family medicine) had faced a malpractice claim by the age of 65 years. The percentage of physicians in these low-risk specialties with a claim against them declined modestly in the latter portion of the study period. This is more good news.

The mean indemnity payout was about $250,000 per award, across all specialties, but the bad news is that the highest median payout for any specialty was $520,924 for pediatricians. This seems impossible until we think about alleged lifelong claimed damages to a neonate or young infant. By another

Stamp from the Bahamas celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Sir Victor Sassoon Heart Foundation.
measure, the median payout in pediatrics was the seventh highest (about $170,000). Of the 66 payments overall that exceeded $1 million, seven were pediatric claims.

These data help explain why so many of us believe tort reform is needed to reduce the degree to which many physicians, including pediatricians, feel the need to practice “defensive medicine” in many situations.

THIS MONTH’S STAMPS

The stamps displayed here include a 2011 French stamp honoring Claude Bourgelat (1712-1779), who founded the world’s first veterinary college in Lyon, France around 1761. Giving up law as a career, Bourgelat was a leading equerry (horseman) and became a veterinary surgeon. He focused on cattle plague (also known as Rinderpest) which we now know to be caused by a morbillivirus (related to measles and canine distemper viruses). This illness is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as one of the 10 plagues inflicted on the Egyptians in the story of Passover. In large part because of a vaccine developed by Walter Plowright, Rinderpest in August became the second infectious disease (after smallpox) to be declared by the United Nations as eradicated from the earth.

Heart Health Stamps

The 2011 stamps from the Bahamas celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Sir Victor Sassoon Heart Foundation. The 15-cent stamp depicts the annual Heart Ball fundraiser, the 65-cent stamps shows a child undergoing a heart exam. The 70-cent stamp (see page 528) portrays Sir Victor (1881-1961). This private charity has helped more than 4,000 Bahamian children with heart disease, including paying for heart surgery when needed.

Sir Victor Sassoon was descended from a Sephardic Jewish family of bankers and merchants primarily based in India and England. Serving in the Royal Naval Air Service in 1915, Sassoon barely survived a crash that left him seriously disabled for life. In the 1920s, he moved to China, where he is said to have built much of modern Shanghai. Because of World War II, he left Shanghai around 1941. He re-established his business empire after the war in the Bahamas, England, and South America. A long-time bachelor and bon vivant, in 1959 he married his nurse in the Bahamas before dying of cardiac complications 2 years later. The Sir Victor Sassoon Heart Foundation was founded by his widow in 1961 in his honor to aid Bahamian children.

REFERENCE