

Billing for Missed Appointments

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There's a bee in my bonnet... I was pleased to be introduced to the first issue of the Journal of Ethics and Mental Health and to learn that it will provide an opportunity for consumers to voice their concerns. The following is mine...

I've been chronically ill since the age of six and now live with multiple conditions and see numerous specialists to manage my illnesses. Over the years, I've had extensive contact with specialist physicians, including psychiatrists and also psychologists. I succeeded, despite my illness, to make it half way through a Ph.D. in Clinical and Experimental Psychology only to have to abandon my pursuits due to new illnesses. While studying, I operated a small private practice as a psychologist for six years. I also was President of a Users' Committee for a number of years in Montreal. In Quebec, these committees are legal entities which operate with budgets supplied by the provincial government. My point is, I consider myself a consumer expert of a sort from numerous angles.

The bee in my bonnet is the increasingly prevalent practice I see in Mississauga where I now live for physicians to bill clients for missed appointments. The position of l'Ordre des psychologues du Québec on this problem is that such a practice is unethical-- one ought not receive income from a service never rendered and any "administration fees" recovered for missed appointments should involve written pre-consent by the client to agreed-upon terms. But physicians all over post announcements they will bill either a penalty (e.g., \$5 to \$20) or a "replacement" fee based on an average billing for appointments missed or not cancelled within 24 to 48 hours. I recently was referred to a clinic that offers psychotherapeutic services delivered by family physicians and they have the audacity to charge in the neighbourhood of \$90 for a missed appointment. These announcements contain no mention of patient options or perspective.

I can confidently say I'm never a no-show for appointments. But just knowing that I'd be billed for getting too sick to leave my house at the last minute deeply offends me. And putting the less powerful, more vulnerable patient in the position of potentially arguing with my potentially unsympathetic healthcare provider to justify my refusal to pay their bill tacitly communicates to me that my provider has no idea how inherently disempowering it is to have to depend on them in the first place. Nor does my healthcare provider realize how arrogant, insulting and disgraceful this practice is to me, that is, to be grabbing more income above the income they already earn off the misfortune of my illness. My relationship with these doctors is by definition damaged to some degree despite the good service they may provide.

My more constructive point is that I think many terrific, "ethical" doctors have no idea that there's an issue of ethics here. Is there not some way to educate physicians so they can make more informed choices about how they decide to manage delinquent patients?

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