THE IMPORTANCE OF LEGIBLE HANDWRITING

It seems there have been complaints about physicians’ handwriting since I was in medical school and despite those complaints, our handwriting never seems to improve. I do not know if our handwriting is any worse than other adults, but it is sometimes much more important, and therein lies the problem. Patients, nurses, pharmacists, and others depend on being able to read our writing for proper treatment and medication.

Last year, a jury in Texas thought that one physician’s handwriting was so bad, they found the physician liable for his bad handwriting. Whatever we as physicians think about the importance of the issue, it has now come to the forefront with this legal case. As we all know, one successful legal theory breeds other legal cases under the same theory. This will no doubt apply to physician handwriting.

The KMA Patient Safety Task Force decided to address the issue of physician handwriting by educating the physician community on the importance of legible handwriting. But the issue does not apply just to physicians any longer – nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and other mid-level practitioners now have prescriptive authority and should look at their own handwriting less they run into the same liability concerns. If you don’t think your handwriting is bad, but you employ someone with prescriptive authority, you may want to check his or her handwriting to make sure it’s legible.

The KMA Patient Safety Task Force has assembled the articles that follow to demonstrate the importance of legible handwriting. David Hester writes about the Texas case and discusses the liability pitfalls of bad handwriting. Bryan A. Loy, MD, of AdminaStar Federal discusses the importance of legible handwriting from a Medicare point of view. His comments could also come from other third-party payers who must be able to read a physician’s writing in order to reimburse for his services. Finally, Anne Bruner and Morton Kasdan, MD, provide a detailed discussion of the issue along with some helpful hints on how to avoid some of the more common problems.

I hope physicians read these articles and understand that they are not meant to attack our entire profession. They are simply provided to assist physicians in avoiding some of the perils that other physicians have encountered because of something as simple as bad handwriting.

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