

What Being Sued Does to a Doctor

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Tonight I went to an educational session offered by my malpractice insurer -- an annual workshop designed to teach physicians to protect ourselves against medical malpractice suits. They present case after case of terrible medical outcomes or unfortunate medical errors. We all leave with a sense of heaviness and dread.

The disturbing thing about listening to someone else's malpractice case is the dark and creepy feeling of "there but for the grace of God go I." None of the doctors in this evening's cases were evil or even indifferent. Their charts made it clear that they were conscientious and knowledgeable. They tried to heal their patients, but instead things went horribly wrong.

Each time the presenter got to the bad part of the story -- the negative outcome -- the room full of physicians collectively groaned. I'll bet we all flashed to our friends, or even ourselves, who have faced the hell of a malpractice suit. I, thankfully, have never been sued. (Can you hear me knocking on wood?) But I know that it could happen at any moment.

I have heard people, both patients and friends, say things like "doctors don't care if they get sued because they have insurance for that." Nothing could be farther from the truth.

My friends who have been sued describe the ordeal as life altering. Tears, sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, and depression are common themes. It is devastating to try your best to help someone and end up hurting them instead. Doctors carry tremendous guilt and self-doubt when they make a medical mistake. A malpractice suit compounds their self-flagellation with risk of financial ruin and public humiliation, which can drag on for years. For physicians who feel unfairly blamed, the predominant emotions are often anger and fear. "I told her to go for a colonoscopy and she didn't go. So why is it my fault that she got cancer?!"

All physicians who have been sued are deeply, negatively affected. Some lose their

passion for medicine. Some no longer trust their patients. Many fantasize about leaving medicine and opening a flower shop or a Bed and Breakfast.

I know that there isn't much sympathy for doctors nowadays. I also know that there are some bad doctors who deserve consequences for their actions, like those who operate drunk or sell opiate prescriptions. But most doctors really are doing the best that they can. They care. They want you to get well. And they are devastated when things go wrong.

I pray that no one that you love ever faces a bad medical outcome. And I am not telling you not to file suit if they do. But before you have your lawyer send that life-altering letter to your doctor, just take a moment to reflect on his or her humanity. Is the money worth the human cost?

Be well,

Dr. C

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