

Wecht offers solutions for malpractice woes

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After blasting local physicians for not attending a seminar on medical malpractice Monday night, outspoken Pittsburgh Coroner Cyril H. Wecht offered two short-ranged steps to help cure the ever-festering problem of medical malpractice.

Since only two of Frederick County's 70 practicing doctors showed up at the Frederick Community College-sponsored seminar, Dr. Wecht declared: "It's part of the medical malpractice melee. Ask any physician and everyone of them is willing to tell you all you want to know about medical malpractice. But where they have learned this I don't know," he said.

He said it didn't "surprise" him that so many doctors chose not to attend. He said, generally, physicians are "apathetic." He termed their "focus" on the medical malpractice problem as "narrow-minded and tunnel vision." He said when 2,000 doctors were invited to attend a similar lecture in Pittsburgh, only "two dozen" came.

Dr. Wecht, who holds degrees in both medicine and law, said what was needed today to curb the ever-mounting number of malpractice cases is a more "personalized" relationship between physician and patient. He said for limited liability cases a board of "arbitration" should be established to decide who is at fault and what legal

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the physician. Quoting the president of the American Medical Association, Wecht said, "five per cent of the physicians in this country are incompetent."

Wecht said that between 75 per cent and 90 per cent of all the malpractice suits filed, are for no more than 20 different medical problems, that is, negligence seems to be in only a few medical practice areas.

The Pittsburgh coroner said that what is truly needed today are "malpractice prevention programs." In all the bills now pending in state legislatures throughout the nation, only about six even mention it, Wecht said. But he said doctors have stood in the path of such programs because they would first have to admit physicians, like auto mechanics, error. He said doctors are not able to "police themselves."

Also a lawyer, Wecht defended "contingent fees" for attorneys handling malpractice suits. (If a settlement is \$10,000 for example, the lawyer might take \$4,000 or 40 per cent for his counsel: contingency fees.) He said by abolishing

such fees, and "only the very rich or near rich would be able to sue in medical malpractice."

Wecht said that the new "consumerism" has helped bolster malpractice suits. "A large percentage of patients now think in terms of suing physicians for malpractice," he said. And, the many "inexperienced attorneys" who refuse to turn down a malpractice suit have fanned the fire of malpractice cases, he said.

What would the physician like to see? "(They) would deprive people of the opportunity to sue," said Dr. Wecht, "that's what the physicians are really saying (today) but can't come out and say it."

Local Frederick physician Dr. R.R. Roberts said the medical malpractice problem is "a situation where more than just the medical profession is going to be hurt." Wecht said that in 75 per cent of all medical malpractice suits that go to

trial the plaintiff cannot get "an expert" (a doctor) to testify in his behalf. He cited cases where doctors who had testified were threatened with medical society blackballing if they did it again.

The seminar was also attended by Wallace Dow, administrator of Frederick Memorial Hospital and Robert R. Cain, FCC assistant director of student development. Three dentists also came to hear Dr. Wecht.