

The Doctor is out

Valley physicians justified in work stoppage

Don't bother trying to make an appointment with your doctor for Monday, April 8. He or she probably won't be there that day. Rio Grande Valley doctors have had enough. They're taking part in a limited walkout for one day as a protest against the high risk of lawsuits physicians in this area incur.

Dr. Juan Campos, president of the Hidalgo/Starr County Medical Society, said more than 600 physicians will close their doors on that date. Not that we blame them.

When doctors get sued at the drop of a hat, they become reluctant to practice medicine. Thanks to the large number of lawsuits resulting in huge verdicts, it's becoming impossible for some doctors' offices to stay in business. As the amount of jury awards goes up, so do doctors' insurance premiums.

The head of the local medical society said severely injured trauma patients have to go to San Antonio because insurance firms won't cover certain physicians in the Rio Grande Valley.

"There is zero coverage here for some doctors," Campos said. "There is no major trauma center here because there is no coverage."

A survey last year found that half of the area's doctors are thinking about moving their practices or retiring within the next 12 months. Why? Because, in the Rio Grande Valley, doctors might as well wear bullseyes on the back of their white coats. They're targets for plaintiffs' attorneys.

Sixty-five percent of Valley doctors have been sued, the 2001 poll by the Texas Medical Association and Citizens Against Law-

suit Abuse found, 70 percent have had medical liability claims filed against them and more than 75 percent of the physicians surveyed are having trouble recruiting outside doctors to the Valley because of the area's reputation for lawsuits. A large majority of doctors — 71 percent of those polled — don't even want to respond to emergency room calls because they're worried they might get sued.

Physicians who devoted their lives to practicing medicine and helping people are too afraid to act on their calling. They are being denied a way to make a living. And that fear of being sued means fewer and fewer doctors, and less medical care available for Valley residents.

For example, Citizens Against Lawsuit Abuse mentions one McAllen heart surgeon who had practiced for 18 years and never been sued. When he was targeted by eight lawsuits — all of which were either dropped or dismissed — he packed up and left. It's not because South Texas has

poor-quality doctors. It's because the Rio Grande Valley is a target-rich environment for trial attorneys.

Some unscrupulous individuals are abusing our legal system, turning a mechanism meant to right wrongs into a money-making machine by suing physicians not because an individual was harmed, but because there's a chance to win a huge award or a big settlement.

Doctors want to draw attention to this medical crisis. Some people might take offense at the idea of physicians closing their doors to prove a point. However, doctors are certainly justified in using their one-day walkout to point out the flaws in our litigation-happy society.

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