

MANAGING YOUR DERMATOLOGY PRACTICE

Send Texters a Message



BY JOSEPH S. EASTERN, M.D.

A dermatologist recently sought my input regarding his two-physician private practice on the West Coast. They were struggling with an increasing problem, he said, of employees

sending personal text messages and surfing the Internet during office hours.

"We added a page to our office manual prohibiting these activities, but there has been no improvement. If anything, it's getting worse," he added.

It always surprises me when physicians think that the solution to any employee issue is an unannounced new page in the office manual. How often do

you suppose your employees peruse your manual, looking for new entries?

Ignorance of the rules is seldom a viable excuse, but if an employee charges you with unreasonable termination, arbitrators may be sympathetic to the contention that policies were established essentially in secret, and no effort was made to make the employee aware of the policy he or she was accused of violating.

Anytime a policy change is made in my office, I call a staff meeting to explain it and answer questions about it. If the change is significant, I also have my manager sit down with each staff member individually and review the new policy in detail, (all of this is documented, of course) making certain everyone fully understands the new policy and the consequences of violating it.

Senate Refuses To Consider Bill to Fix SGR

BY ALICIA AULT

Legislation that would have provided a 10-year replacement of Medicare's sustainable growth rate formula was blocked when senators voted 53-47 against bringing the bill to the floor.

The sustainable growth rate (SGR) has dictated how Medicare pays physicians. For the last 7 years, the formula has required a reduction in physician fees, but each of those years, Congress has voted to reverse the cuts.

Eleven Democrats voted against cloture, a procedural motion that precedes a legislative vote: Evan Bayh (Ind.), Robert Byrd (W.Va.), Kent Conrad (N.D.), Byron Dorgan (N.D.), Russ Feingold (Wisc.), Herbert Kohl (Wisc.), Bill Nelson (Fla.), Jon Tester (Mont.), Mark Warner (Va.), James Webb (Va.), and Ron Wyden (Ore.). Independent Joseph Lieberman (Conn.) also voted no. No Republicans voted yes.

In a statement, American Medical Association President James Rohack said, "The AMA is deeply disappointed that the Senate today blocked consideration of S. 1776, legislation to preserve access to health care for America's seniors, baby boomers and military families."

Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), the legislation's sponsor, and her Democratic colleagues did not offer any way to pay for the fix, which would have cost an estimated \$250 billion over the 10 years.

Republicans—and some Democrats—leapt on the bill's lack of funding, especially since President Obama has said he would not sign a health bill that added to the deficit. The SGR fix was presented by Sen. Stabenow and her supporters—including the AMA—as something entirely separate from health reform, thus possibly exempt from that promise.

"Although many will claim that their vote against cloture was a vote for fiscal responsibility, there is nothing fiscally responsible about pretending that Medicare will save money from cuts that Congress has no intention to let go into effect," said Dr. Joseph W. Stubbs, president of the American College of Physicians.

The House is not expected to act on any physician fee fix until after it considers health reform. ■

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We then have each staffer sign a written copy of the new policy and we post a copy on the bulletin board in our lunch room. Call it overkill if you wish, but no one can plausibly claim they weren't told the rules had changed.

As to the specific problem on the West Coast, the issue clearly is neither local nor trivial. Nor is it medicine specific. When I shop with my wife, I'm increasingly amazed at how many salespeople we see texting or chatting on cell phones, often oblivious of waiting customers.

This is especially true of younger workers. Surveys have shown that most Amer-

icans in their teens and twenties find nothing inappropriate or rude about using this technology in any conceivable situation, including the workplace. Without firm policies in place, some staffers will inevitably abuse this technology.

And the damage can be significant. A typical text message, according to one study, takes about 1 minute to send or receive, so an employee who sends and receives 30 messages a day squanders an hour of office time. For a full-time employee that's about 20 hours a month.

How many additional patients could you see in that 240 hours? How much

less liability risk would there be if that one employee were paying attention instead of texting? Add a second texter, and a couple of Web surfers, and suddenly you have a major problem.

If you have yet to establish a formal policy on this issue, I recommend that you put one in place immediately. When you call a staff meeting to explain it, speak plainly: Using office time for personal texting and Web surfing is theft, pure and simple. They are stealing your time. Make this crystal clear.

As with any policy, the keys are diligence and consistency. Always enforce

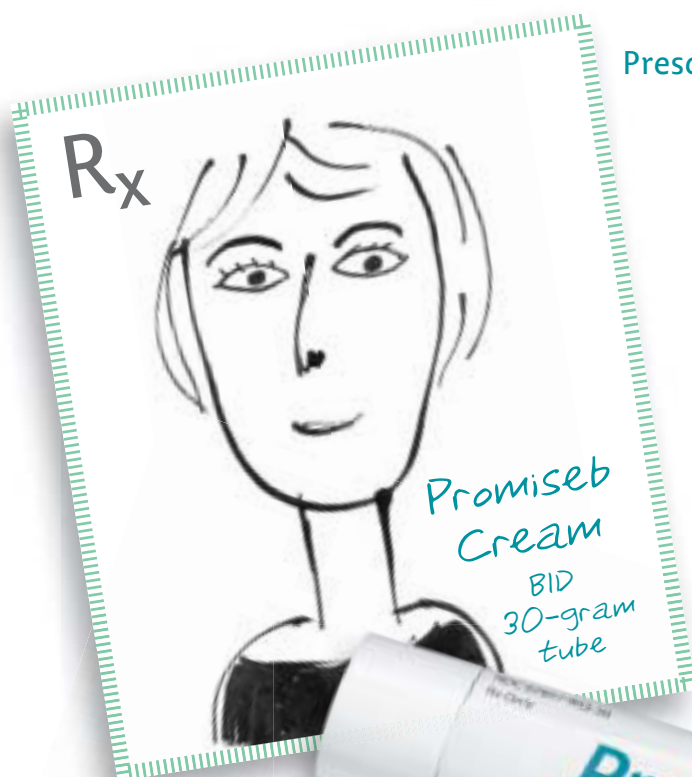
this and every other rule, and follow through with consequences when necessary—even if it means penalizing a key employee, or even terminating someone. Firings should always be a last resort, but nothing will make it clearer that you are serious, nor send a stronger message that it is never permissible to steal any office property—least of all your most marketable commodity, office time. ■

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