

Outlook on Lifestyle

It's the IBM/physician wage war

Let's be fair. Although doctors have a reputation for charging an arm and a leg, this reputation may not be based on fact. We live in a service-oriented society where, in many cases, the cost of non-medical services is escalating far faster than physicians' fees.

For example, when I take my Volkswagen in for routine repairs, I am charged \$48 an hour for labor. Heaven knows what I'd pay to keep a luxury car on the road. To my knowledge, the Medicare authorities have no pending legislation to limit auto mechanics' charges, depending on what ails your car.

Last month my IBM typewriter went on the fritz. My secretary called the corporation service center for our area to request assistance. The company representative agreed to send out a repairperson — at a staggering \$158 per hour labor, including travel time, plus 25 cents a mile. After some backing and filling, we acceded to a service call when another client needed help, thereby sharing the cost of travel time. A week ago, the fix-it man came and replaced a \$4.50 drive belt that had broken. The belt was not guaranteed. I grudgingly paid the \$265.14 bill; it seemed like a lot of la-

DR. GOTT



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bor cost for the service I received. I think I was ripped off. IBM either needed my money to buy carpeting for its corporate executive suite or, more likely, the company is more interested in selling computers than fixing Selectric typewriters.

Years ago, as an elderly colleague of mine was preparing to take down his shingle, he decided to separate the wheat from the chaff. He doubled his office fees to an astronomical figure — I think it was \$30 then — in the hope of attracting well-heeled patients to ease him into retirement. In those days, it was pretty well understood that you didn't seek assistance from doctors who charged more than you could afford. Patients of modest means were content to see the young

doctor down the street (in this case, me) who was starting a practice and needed all the business he could get, whether it paid well or not.

The system has changed. Boy, has it changed. Today, physicians (whom government agencies have identified as "over-chargers") may be required to refund money to patients and, in Massachusetts at least, can lose their licenses. I'm not aware of any watchdog committee that will force IBM to pay me back part of its overcharge, although I have been a loyal customer for years.

I don't make \$158 an hour when I'm working. If I'm lucky and the office is running at full capacity, I may make \$100 an hour. Of that, half goes to overhead. Of the remaining \$50, about 30 percent is paid in taxes. So, on a good day, my take-home pay is about \$35 an hour. I'm not even paid for my time on-call, giving advice on the telephone, driving, researching difficult cases, filling out insurance forms, sitting alone thinking and planning, consulting with other doctors, teaching or carrying out out committee work at the hospital. I have no sick time or paid vacations. When I stop working — even for a weekend — the income stops. I am not permitted to raise my

fees for the elderly who are invariably more time-consuming than are younger patients. When I provide a late-night service or see sick people on holidays, I don't get time-and-a-half; in fact the differential is ludicrous. I'm told by the government that when I attend a desperately sick patient in the hospital's Intensive Care Unit, I cannot charge more than \$21.60 per hour. Bored by this litany? So am I.

I'm not sharing this information with you to complain; I just think you ought to know the facts. I live comfortably, but I work a 100-hour week to do so. Although some doctors are able to gouge the public, most practicing physicians in my generation

are caught in the same bind as I am. We muddle along day by day, shaking our heads at the dizzying array of regulations and restrictions that seem calculated to drive the private practitioner nuts.

Sometimes, it's depressing. I wonder about a society whose priorities permit a typewriter repairman to demand and receive \$158 per hour (plus 25 cents a mile), most of which goes to corporate upkeep, while physicians are restricted by law to a fraction of that figure. If I'm ever crazy enough to call IBM for repairs, I'll have to remember to ask the serviceman how he landed such a cushy job.

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Here's the secret to painting neatly

DEAR POLLY — If you are painting something but there are areas of the surface that you don't want to mark, just put a little petroleum jelly or grease over those areas, then paint. Any paint on the petroleum-jelly-covered surface will wipe right off. You'll have a neat, easy job. — SHANNON

DEAR SHANNON — This is such a handy pointer when doing so many little paint jobs. Your helpful pointer earns you the Pointer of the Week award, a copy of my book "Polly's Pointers: 1,081 Helpful Hints for Making Everything Last Longer." Others may order it for \$6.50. Make your check payable to POLLY'S POINTERS and send to POLLY'S POINTERS, P.O. Box 93863, Cleveland, OH 44101-5863. — POLLY

DEAR POLLY — I think I have discovered something new, but maybe it's old and I just rediscovered it! We like to eat sliced cucumbers placed in vinegar water with a little salt and sugar to taste, but the cucumbers used to always shrivel a bit if they weren't eaten the same day. So I bought some sugar substitute and used a half sugar and half sugar-substitute mixture instead of only sugar. The cucumbers were still fairly crisp the next day. — H.W.M.

DEAR POLLY — Here is a way to get that fresh parsley chopped finely. Drop several bunches of parsley into a small juice glass. Insert your kitchen shears into the glass and snip, snip, snip. The same trick works for most herbs.

For a new steak treat, dice a couple of garlic cloves very finely, add a handful of chopped fresh parsley and serve the mixture on top of grilled steak. This is from my French daughter-in-law, who is a super cook! — K.M.

DEAR POLLY — I have never seen a recipe that combined cut sweet corn

POLLY'S POINTERS



POLLY FISHER

and zucchini squash but, faced with a small quantity of both, I tried serving them together. I seasoned as for corn alone. The two made a delicious dish and a colorful green and white one besides. — B.A.F.

DEAR POLLY — When cooking with cocoa, I often have trouble getting the lumps out of the cocoa. This makes it difficult to blend it smoothly with the other ingredients. What's the best way to get rid of the lumps? — HELEN

DEAR HELEN — There are two simple ways: Sift the cocoa through an ordinary flour sifter or a wire strainer, or whiz the cocoa into a fine, lumpless powder in your blender or food processor. In any case, the cocoa will then be easy to mix with the other dry ingredients in your recipe. — POLLY

RECIPE OF THE WEEK: Valentine's Day is just around the corner. Treat your sweetie with these homemade caramel sweets!

Mix 2 cups sugar, ¼ cup dark corn syrup, ½ cup unsalted butter and 1 cup light cream or half-and-half in a 3-quart saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. When the mixture is boiling vigorously, add another cup of cream and stir to combine. Continue cooking at a boil until it reaches a temperature of 245 degrees on a candy thermometer. Immediately remove the pan from the heat and stir in 1½ teaspoon vanilla. Then pour the candy mixture into an 8-inch-square pan that has been generously buttered or sprayed with a non-stick cooking spray. Let the caramel cool at room temperature until firm. Cut into 1-inch squares.

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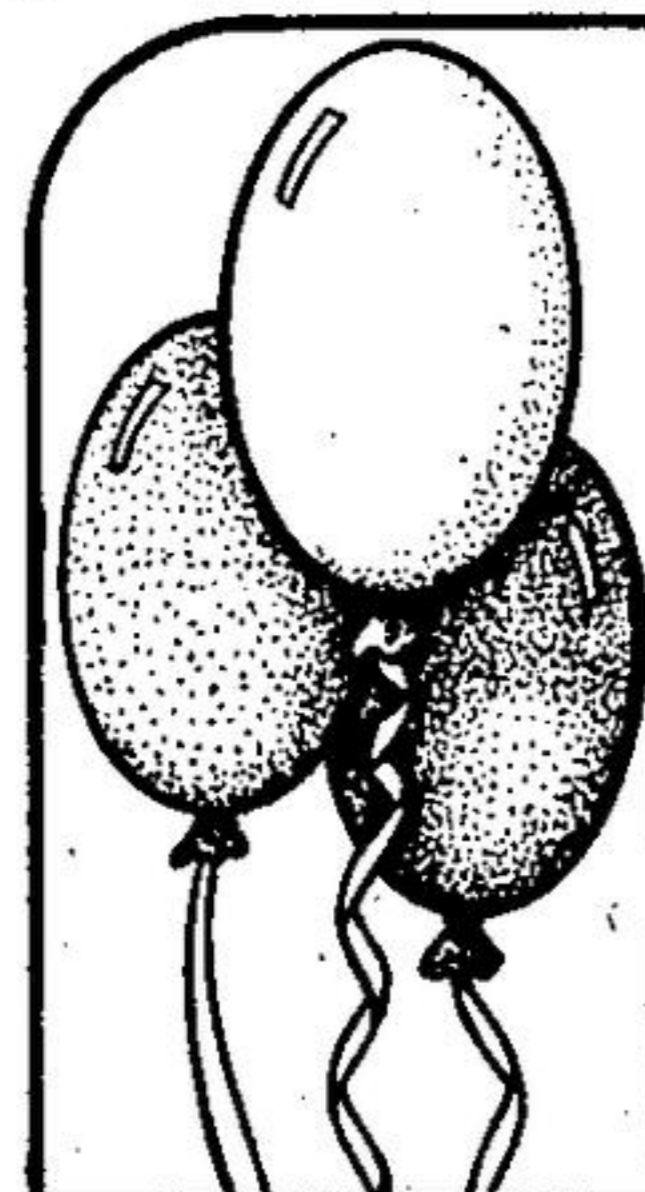


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