

## **From substance abuse to relationships with patients: More and more disciplinary actions against physicians in North Carolina**

By Manuel Alender

In September 2007 a woman visited Dr. Michael Lincoln near Charlotte because of some back pain. During the visit he asked her about her tattoo and pretended to examine it, requiring the woman to disrobe.

But instead of examining the tattoo, Lincoln started to touch the woman's body art inappropriately and made an inappropriate remark.

The woman never went to Lincoln again. After this incident Lincoln's medical license was suspended for three months.

This is only one of numerous stories about doctors in North Carolina who do not practice their job in a way they should, according to disciplinary records of the North Carolina Medical Board. In the first six months of 2008 the Board has already imposed disciplinary action against 77 physicians and nurse practitioners.

The list of problems is extensive: drinking alcohol while practicing medicine, sexual relationships with patients, substance abuse, writing prohibited prescriptions for family members, even inappropriately touching patients, as described in the example with Lincoln. The NC Medical Board's records also tell about the engagement of physicians assistants without licenses, the falsification of patient records or misdiagnosis of diseases. Besides small and inevitable human failures some cases of these "bad doctors" are alarming.

According to a review of the Medical Board's disciplinary reports from mid-2004 to mid-2008, most of the Board's punishments were imposed because of three major reasons: Alcohol or drug abuse on the part of doctors, sexual relationships with patients, and wrong prescriptions of medicines.

"From 2006 to 2007 the number of alcohol abuses has increased from 39 to 48 percent," says Jean Fisher Brinkley, director of public affairs at the NC Medical Board. "But the Board is generally getting more aggressive towards these doctors," Fisher adds.

That statement is proved by the increasing number of disciplinary actions by the Board. While there were 89 disciplinary actions in 2005, the number rose to 150 cases in 2006 and to 188 in 2007. In the 2008 about 10 percent of cases involve alcohol abuse.

In general the number of disciplinary actions by state medical boards in the U.S. decreased between 2005 and 2007. According to the non-profit interest organization "Public Citizen" the rate of disciplinary actions against physicians was the lowest in history. North Carolina was one of the few states where the number of these actions increased during that period.

It is not clear whether that is due to the strictness of the North Carolina board or whether there are still too many doctors practicing without sufficient control.

While 30,000 physicians have a medical license in North Carolina, 22,000 of them are currently practicing in the state. "There are probably more malpractices of physicians we don't know about," confesses Fisher Brinkley.

According to physician Reginald Obi from the Washington County Hospital in North Carolina it is very bad if doctors are seen in such a negative light. "Being a doctor is such an honorable position. You are somebody who is considered to be very important for the people," says Obi. He tells about his home country, Nigeria, where doctors are one of the three honorable professions beside religious heads and lawyers. "To be a doctor is like a calling," says the doctor for internal medicines.

However, not all physicians in North Carolina consider their job as a calling. The Board employs at least 10 investigators to supervise doctors in the state. According to Fisher Brinkley, the Board gets its tips from the media, other physicians, hospitals, the police or pharmacies. "But the largest source are the patients themselves," says Fisher.

"To protect the health, safety, and welfare of the people of this state" is the task of the North Carolina Medical Board, where all physicians are registered. Using the "Licensee Search" on the board's web site, patients can search for the disciplinary records of every doctor in the state. The organization also tries to call attention to the public via publications, press conferences and the release of reports that include all disciplinary actions against physicians in North Carolina. "The NC Med Board does a very good job. Everybody knows what is going on because all the records are public," says Obi.

Nevertheless the Web page with the Board's disciplinary actions is not widely known. "Many persons don't know that the Board exists. We have to do a better job to let people know that," says Fisher Brinkley. In the upcoming year, for example, a radio advertising campaign is planned to promote the board's work, and the advantages of its Web site. "In my personal view they are doing what they are supposed to do," says Obi.

But Obi is not surprised about the numerous and sometimes alarming cases of malpractice: "It is not only a problem in America but all over the world.

This is just a reflection of society and, after all, doctors are only humans, too.”