I Was Sued And Lived To Tell The Tale

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A few years ago, I was sued. Yes indeed, I can now shout it from the rooftops. I know what it feels like to sit in the fire and burn into ashes of self-doubt, regret and emptiness; staring into the soulless, Cyclopean eye of a deposition camera, recounting my sins, defending my pride. I know what it's like to live with fear, up close and personal. And I know what it feels like to lose.

Does this make me a horrible, terrible doctor, fit to be hung, dried and quartered?

Studies show that that number of claims filed per physician in the United States is 8 times greater than in Canada. Lawsuits enter the judicial system in the US 75% more frequently. A Canadian physician is one-fifth as likely to be sued for malpractice as their American counterparts. It's a phenomenon physician and patients have come to accept and expect based on America's underlying ideology of individualism. And this was all okay, in fact coveted during the height of healthcare delivery in the latter part of the twentieth century. But today, with exponential demand on healthcare services accompanied by its attendant sky-rocketing cost, this nation is beginning to wonder why.

Being sued comes with a terrible stigma. As soon as you open the envelope, you can feel your heart drop a thousand fathoms as the black oil slick of doubt seeps into fissures of your mind. Your thoughts steep in terror, your mind leaping to possibility; I'm done for, what's going to happen, this is the end of my career, how will I survive … what if I lose? You don't want to know that truth. You don't want to walk there. And so you go through the motions with visceral pain until it's all over, and then bow your head, your self-worth and will power ripped from your heart.

You walk into your future alone, determined never to let this happen again. Determine never to get sued again, determined to order as many tests as possible, defend your career, life, self-esteem and always to cower from fear. And so, you change.

Instead of being a good doctor, a great doctor, you become that doctor. You become the one who's afraid to stand up for herself, the one who now practices "defensive medicine" before she can practice "good medicine."

It's almost as if you go into this giving profession with bright shiny eyes, but before you can get started, the vultures are waiting on the sidelines, ready to peck them out. With those odds against you, there's only one way left, and that's to acquiesce, punching a clock day-in, day-out until it's all over, and you can be happy once again.

But is there really only one way out?

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