

EDITORIAL

CERTIFICATION FOR ILLNESS

The Hippocratic oath and the Geneva Code make no reference to the doctor's activity in certification, but modern living is such that a good part of the professional activity of the doctor is taken up with certifying fitness or otherwise with regards to work. Patients who are ill seek not only treatment but also a medical certificate which spells paid leave, financial compensation, excuse from work, change of occupation, suitability for employment, and even desirability from the point of granting immigration permits. So entrenched is this practice that few doctors in contact with patients can avoid ever issuing a certificate of some type, and even doctors who are otherwise engaged in branches like preventive medicine and basic science cannot resist at times the temptation to issue a certificate or two.

The basis for such a demand has much to do with the modern society where employers demand a proof of illness, and with good reason, for they have to bear the cost in terms of sick leave pay, hospitalisation charges, and sometimes job adjustment and even workman compensation. Clearly, no businessman would ever agree to be the paymaster without some control, and it must appear logical to him that the doctor, being the person with reputed integrity, and also concerned with the case, would be the ideal person to certify. In due course, this service of certification has come to stay, and a sick workman sometimes regards this service as being more important than that in terms of treatment, for sickness loses many of its stings once it spells paid holiday, and security of tenure, and under the circumstance, some may even prefer that the treatment is a bit less vigorous and effective so that recovery may not be too soon!

Nevertheless, the primary function of a doctor is the treatment of illnesses, and certification at best is to him only a subsidiary service item. Further, any doctor in practice soon realises that whereas certification in a long term illness is a relatively easy matter to decide; in short illness of a few days' duration, the ability to work is decided by more a matter of will than of incapacity. Thus it is not an unusual sight to have a doctor with an attack of influenza, and running a fever of 101°F working and issuing sick certificates to some employees with a similar illness but much milder manifestation of symptoms and signs! Clearly where the doubt exists, disputes arise, and accusation of inaccurate or even false certification were frequently hurled from irate and sometimes responsible quarters. Further, there will always be a few black sheeps who regard certifying sickness as a means of income, and thereby further compromising the good name of the profession.

In Britain recently, the doctors decided that they would no longer certify sickness which could cause no more than 3 days of incapacity, on the ground that it really was impossible to be reliable in such short term illnesses, and the concession would be better left to the discretion of the employer himself. Locally, doctors have had their share of fair criticism and unfair abuse regarding certification, and it may be that the time has come too for us to tell the public that certifying sickness is not a primary duty of a doctor, and in short term illnesses, we would prefer not to make any recommendation at all, since any employer with a modicum of sense could see whether an employee was fit or otherwise in the majority of instances, and in case of doubt and dispute, there will be time enough to have a professional opinion.

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