

City Gives Dr. Hi Billmore Shot of Comedownance

By WILLIAM SHERMAN
(Twelfth of a series)

When doctors met Health Department attorney Stuart Laurence, they usually begin with loud protests of innocence and agonizing tales of self-sacrifice and good works.

By the time the meetings are over, many of the physicians and other professionals who are called in by the score to answer to fraud charges and other abuses of the medicaid program are mewing soft apologies, making promises of good behavior, and are ready to sing checks for restitution.

Laurence, 32, a \$15,000-a-year city employe, last year helped recover about \$2 million from medicaid providers, including doctors, pharmacists, podiatrists, chiropractors and other professional men.

Jaw-boning is one of the many methods used by the Health Department to combat fraud, Ping-Ponging and other abuses by the professionals who participate in the medicaid program.

Often, Laurence is out posing as a medicaid patient.

Earlier in THE NEWS medicaid probe, a reporter described how he posed as a welfare client with a medicaid card and visited a group medical practice in

MEDICAID PROBE

Queens and asked to see a doctor about a cold.

He was directed immediately to a foot doctor, then sent twice to an internist with directions for a third visit, and then to a psychiatrist. He sat through chest X-rays, a cardiogram, gave two urine specimens, gave blood samples, and was given prescriptions for six different medicines.

That cold cure would cost about \$112, according to the standard medicaid fee schedule.

But that incident was nothing com-

pared to what Stuart Laurence discovered after he shucked his three-piece suit, donned a pair of blue jeans and an old shirt and visited two medicaid centers on the lower east side with a medicaid card.

Using a fictitious name, the Health Department attorney found out what happens to some patients and later discovered bills coming in from doctors he had never seen, and a pharmacy he had never visited.

It all began when Laurence walked into a medicaid center at 57 Avenue D, a group practice run by dentist Ralph Berger. There, he asked for a podiatrist.

"They took my medicaid card and told me to join a line for chest X-rays. I refused and went to see the podiatrist," he recalled.

Laurence says he told podiatrist Daniel Platt that he "walked around a lot and sometimes my feet get tired." Platt X-rayed his feet and then wrapped them in bandages.

"Platt told me he was taking the



HEALTH DEPARTMENT attorney Stuart Laurence. Photo by Mel Finkelstein.

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Dr. Hi Billmore Is Given a Shot of Comedownance

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X-rays for his records," he recalls.

His feet bandaged, the patient left 57 Avenue D and proceeded directly to 172 E. Fourth St., another group practice, owned by Ralph Berger.

"I went to the reception desk and asked to see an eye doctor for an examination, and a chiropractor came out and offered to take care of me."

Work on the Spine

"The chiropractor, Sheila Connolly, gave me a short lecture on what chiropractors do and then made adjustments of my spine for the next 10 minutes," he said.

His chiropractic examination concluded, Laurence returned to the reception desk and, he said, "again asked to see an eye doctor."

"This time, the receptionist told me I had to have my teeth X-rayed first because I was a new patient."

Still No Eye Test

Laurence protested that his teeth had been X-rayed three months earlier, but the dentist's receptionist insisted on a full series of X-rays anyway.

"I kept saying I wanted to see the eye doctor, but it was to no avail," he recalled.

"Then I was led to another dental chair and Ralph Berger examined my mouth. Another dentist named Radu Lupovici look over and he spent about two hours on me, filling three teeth. Finally I left," he said.

Later, the lawyer remarked, "you know, I never did get my eyes examined."

Several weeks later, the medic-aid bills started coming in. The

bill submitted by podiatrist Daniel Platt was accurate, but then Laurence received a few surprises.

First he received a bill from a Dr. Thomas Revak, of 57 Avenue D, who signed an invoice saying he had treated him for bronchitis, had given him a penicillin shot and had given him two prescriptions. Revak billed the city \$8.20.

And then medicaid received a bill from pharmacist Howard Siegel, who runs the East Village Rx Center, also at 57 Avenue D. Siegel billed the city \$6 for prescriptions for darvon, a tranquilizer, and a second drug.

Chiropractor Submits Bill

Sheila Connolly sent in her chiropractor's bill saying that the patient had visited her twice. Her bill was also \$6.

Then the dentist bill arrived—signed by Robert Boxer, and not Ralph Berger or Radu Lupovici. It was for \$52.80 and included a \$7 item for cleaning.

"I did not have my teeth cleaned," said Laurence, who has since suspended Berger, effective

Feb. 28. and is holding up Boxer's payments.

But the charade wasn't over, because several days later medicaid received another bill—this time from one Jerald Greenwald, of 172 E. fourth St., charging \$5.20 for examining Laurence for a common cold.

The first person Laurence called down was Dr. Thomas Revak, who sent a bill for bronchitis treatment. When Revak appeared, Laurence asked him if he had personally treated this patient. He answered "Yes."

Suspended From Program

Revak also said he injected the penicillin, wrote out the prescriptions, and signed the invoices.

"I had never seen the man before in my life," said Laurence.

Revak was suspended from the medicaid program by Laurence, and as of yesterday still did not know that the man he said he treated for bronchitis was sitting across the table from him during the Health Department inquiry.

Then Miss Connolly was called down, and she admitted to Lau-

rence that she only saw him once. She paid a \$2,000 restitution but was not suspended from the program.

Several days later, Dr. Greenwald was called down and Laurence asked him if he had treated the patient whose name appeared on the invoice.

Greenwald answered, "I don't know."

"I could have seen him, but maybe it was Dr. Cohen,"

"Who is Dr. Cohen?" asked Laurence.

Greenwald replied that Cohen worked for him a few days a week and that he was paid \$17 an hour, plus 10% of what he billed medicaid.

"How can he bill? He isn't even registered with the medicaid program" Laurence responded.

Told of the Regulations

Greenwald was reminded that under city medicaid regulations, a physician cannot bill for anyone else treating a patient, except himself.

Greenwald replied that he had sent a registered letter to the

Health Department, stating he was employing Cohen and produced a receipt for the letter.

Then Laurence said, "Your letter doesn't matter, your name is on the bill. You signed it."

"Well, maybe I saw him, I don't know, if it wasn't me, it was Cohen."

Then Laurence stood up, looked at Greenwald and said, "You are in a lot of trouble."

He Begins to Sweat

Greenwald started to sweat and stammered, "Why?"

"Because," said Laurence, leaning over the table, "I am the patient and I never saw you or Dr. Cohen."

"Well, maybe it was a clerical error... maybe the receptionist mixed up the medicaid cards... I don't know."

"I never saw anybody for a cold," declared Laurence.

Moments later, Laurence told Greenwald, "You are suspended from the medicaid program... I advise you to get an attorney."

Greenwald asked, "What should I do?"

Told to Get a Lawyer

"Get an attorney. This discussion is over."

Finally, pharmacist Howard Siegel of the East Village Rx Center was called in.

According to Laurence, "He offered no explanation for the prescription." Siegel was also suspended from medicaid.

The bills and other evidence of the episode are now in the hands of the city commissioner of Investigation, Nicholas Scopetta.

NEXT: Surprise visit to a medicaid "factory."