

2014 ABC's: F - Fees

written by Richard Leslie | May 24, 2016

Avoiding Liability Bulletin - April 2014

NOTE: In the [February 2014 issue of the Avoiding Liability Bulletin](#), I raised many questions for the reader's thought, research, and discussion with colleagues. The questions were on a variety of topics, arranged alphabetically. Some of those questions, with my answers, follow. The answers are brief and are not intended to be a thorough exploration of the topic. (In the [March 2014 issue of the Avoiding Liability Bulletin](#), I answered questions raised on the topics of barter, neglect, violence toward patient, and taking a zoo trip with patient.)

Under what circumstances is it appropriate to raise a patient's fee during the course of therapy? Does raising one's fee during the course of therapy raise the issue of exploitation? Is there a limit to the size of the increase? Is a twenty-five percent increase ethically permissible?

DISCUSSION: While there may be a law or regulation somewhere that addresses this issue, I am not aware of any that directly addresses the raising of a patient's fee during the course of therapy. In short, I would argue that raising one's fee during the course of therapy does raise the issue of exploitation. A therapist or counselor might seek to raise his or her fee for a variety of reasons. Some argue that raising the fee of an existing patient should be viewed as exploitation because the patient or client came in with an understanding of the fee, and then, just when the patient became reliant upon the practitioner, the practitioner raised the fee. Patients may justifiably feel exploited – especially if not informed of the possibility of raises, or the limitations (e.g., as to frequency or percentage) to raises, in the disclosures made to patients before the commencement of treatment.

Codes of ethics of professional associations may not address the issue directly, or at all, because of their sensitivities to antitrust concerns. Those that address the issue are likely to require disclosure to the patient concerning the possibility of future increases and/or prior reasonable notice of an increase. Generally, laws, regulations, or codes of ethics will require that the practitioner disclose, prior to the commencement of treatment, the fee to be charged for the services to be rendered or the basis upon which the fee will be computed or determined. If a practitioner wants to reserve the right to raise fees during the course of therapy, assuming there is no statutory or ethical prohibition against such action, that fact should be disclosed to the patient, in writing, prior to the commencement of treatment. Other information might also be considered for inclusion, such as the frequency or number of raises possible, the percentage of any possible increase, and the amount of prior notice to be given of a proposed increase.

Because of the potential for allegations of exploitation, and in order to avoid the drafting of a complex disclosure statement regarding this issue, it might be easiest and safest to raise fees for new patients

and to continue to see existing patients at the fee that is established at the out of their treatment. Of course, the practitioner is free to implement policies around fees as he or she deems appropriate - provided that no law, regulation, or ethical code provision is violated. With respect to the twenty-five percent increase question, practitioners should carefully consider whether such an increase could be considered to constitute exploitation under the circumstances, or whether it would be considered as reasonable and fair by the patient, by an ethics committee, or by the state licensing board.