Telemedicine – Hours of Experience Toward Licensure?

written by Richard Leslie | May 24, 2016

Avoiding Liability Bulletin – February 2008

… How does the licensing board in your state handle the acceptability of hours of experience toward licensure as a counselor or therapist when the pre-licensed person gains hours of experience doing therapy or counseling over the Internet? Are such hours of experience prohibited? Are they permitted? If permitted, is there any limit to the number of hours that may be claimed toward licensure? Is the law silent on this issue? These are questions worthy of considering, especially for supervisors, pre-licensed persons, and licensing boards.

Some state laws may not directly address the issue of the acceptability of "Internet hours" or may be vague and it therefore may be arguable. It will depend upon the wording of the law addressing required hours of experience. Other licensing laws may prohibit such hours either directly or indirectly, while some may allow such hours (I have not researched this). Viewpoints about these kinds of hours will vary. How would a licensing board view an application for licensure that claimed that all of the required hours of experience were gained by doing online therapy? Would the board try to deny the application? Would the board have sufficient grounds to deny the application? Should the application be denied in order to protect the public? While some licensing boards may have addressed these questions, I suspect that others have not – but they certainly should.

In California, effective January 1, 2008, applicants for the marriage and family therapist license will be allowed to claim hours of experience where the psychotherapy was performed over the Internet (the practice of "telemedicine"). The bill was sponsored by the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and was supported by the Board of Behavioral Sciences (the licensing board). The number of hours that may be accepted is limited to 125 hours, and all telemedicine services performed must comply with another statute that mandates, among other things, verbal and written informed consent. The Association wanted to establish in statute that such hours were acceptable (the law had essentially been silent on the issue), but also wanted to limit the number of hours that could be counted toward licensure – thus preventing someone from getting all or many of their hours of experience via the Internet – perhaps never being face-to-face with a patient. Other kinds of hours, such as telephone counseling and psychological testing hours, have for a long time been similarly limited.