Reading Medical Records

Reading Medical Records

Second Edition

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Introduction

This book is designed to enable a lawyer or paralegal or any other compensation professional to read and work with a medical record and to converse with medical consultants.

The items which it contains are simple. The first three chapters provide a general introduction to medical records and their use in the legal context. Chapter two contains a brief description of the basic documents which make up a medical record, showing how they come into being, where they may be found and the kinds of information that they are likely to contain. A fairly complete set of illustrative documents is appended to this chapter. Chapter three discusses how the materials in a medical record can be organized and presented efficiently by means of a flow-chart. Chapter four deals with the basic template that lies behind most medical documents, the history and physical examination.

The remaining five chapters deal with important terms and concepts in clinical medicine. This is not medicine as it is taught to doctors, but specially selected and interpreted to meet the needs and purposes of compensation lawyers. The topics treated here are:

1. Head injuries and the related topic of mental impairments
2. Musculoskeletal problems
3. Cardiac disability and
4. Lung disability heart and lung disability.

These topics (brains, bones, hearts and lungs) cover most of the medical problems raised in personal injury and compensation evaluation. The items presented even within these topics have been further selected out, for much of the information that is important to doctors is more or less irrelevant to lawyers. Other items, e.g. intervertebral disc disease or minimal brain damage, are treated in some detail since they are common injuries and, moreover, give lawyers handling head injuries and back cases a good deal of difficulty.

Some special tools have been added.

1. **Short working glossaries**. A very short glossary (just a few pages) has been appended to each of the five medical chapters. These are not intended as reference dictionaries, but rather as a list of the basic terms which must be understood in order to work efficiently in these areas. These terms should, if possible, be learned off: the time and effort involved will be repaid many times over in saving the reader from the chore of constant reference to a medical dictionary.

2. **Model handwritten notes** have also been added to each of the four medical chapters. Each represents the history and physical examination in an appropriate case. These

are intended to teach the reader the common terms and especially the abbreviations which are used by doctors in handwritten progress notes etc. They are ,of course, accompanied by translations. The use of symbols and especially letter abbreviations (acronyms) is increasing in medicine as elsewhere, and quite large dictionaries of abbreviations can be needed to cover them all. For the most part, however, only a (relative) few are in common use and most of these will be found in these model notes.

These two items, the model handwritten notes and the short wworking glosssaries, should be studied very seriously. They are the key to handling medical information efficiently. They should be committed to memory in the interests of efficiency and not just treated as reference works. It should very seldom be necessary to go beyond these simple resources.

3. **A short additional glossary of abbreviations and symbols** has also been appended to the book. This is taken from the list of officially recognized acronyms published by a small hospital. It was compiled by a very intelligent nurse and is , I think, superior to the published lists of many large referral hospitals. The reader should become as familiar as possible with this list, but it is a short reference work not intended to be memorized in advance.

4. **Illustrative drawings**. More than eighty computer drawn illustrations and diagrams have been provided on the principle that one picture is worth a thousand words. These have been interpolated into the medical chapters at appropriate points in the text for the convenience of the reader.

This book is the fruit of more than two decades of experience in teaching law students, lawyers, and paralegals how to read and work with medical records. This experience is the foundation of my belief that a considerable degree of competence in this area is well within the ability of any one who wishes to acquire it. This book is particularly designed for the young lawyer or legal assistant who is just beginning to do personal injury or disability work. It is short and (I hope) clear and readable, but it contains more than enough information for most legal purposes. A lawyer does not have to know how to diagnose and treat diseases, only to evaluate them for compensation purposes. Fortunately this does not require a vast amount of medical learning. Indeed all that is needed, at least in the initial reading of a medical record, is to be sufficiently familiar with basic terms and concepts to form some idea of what was happening in the case. Detailed and more accurate understanding can be supplied later by further reading and discussion with medical consultants. The latter is extremely important. To be able to communicate meaningfully and efficiently with doctors and other medical personnel is indeed the basic prerequisite for anyone working in the compensation area. Ignorance of basic terms and notions on the part of the lawyer leads to long and frustrating conferences, with prolonged explanations by the doctor which are as often as not misunderstood by the lawyer. The very basic level of familiarity with things medical which is contained in these pages is more than is ordinarily required to facilitate useful communication between the two professions.

One last point. There is more information in this little book than is absolutely required for an elementary course in medical records. For instance, I do not normally in my course deal with the autonomic nerves, or with eye ear nose and throat matters. But, as I say to my law students, don't throw the book away or leave it to gather dust on your bookshelves.

Keep working with it. Take it down in the odd spare moment and read a chapter or even a few sections; you will be surprised how much better you will perform and how much more understanding of cases you will achieve.