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The Future

The Commission was recently invited to speak to a group of medical students and residents. The presentation itself was the normal sort – what the Commission is, who the Commission is, and what the Commission does. We do this sort of presentation in one form or another half a dozen times a year in a variety of venues. This one also focused on the intersection of the Commission’s work in the policy realm whether it be in rules, legislation, or guidance. On the Commission side, it was myself and the Commission’s medical consultant, Dr. Gina Fino. Aside from the informational aspects of the presentation, the attendees had questions about Dr. Fino’s work as a licensed physician with a regulatory body. It’s always a little daunting as a non-clinician to speak to these audiences, but at the conclusion, I took the opportunity to chat briefly with the audience about the importance of communication with patients. The Commission receives anywhere between 1800 and 2400 complaints annually. If there is a single through-line over the past 18 months, there has been a steady flow of complaints where communication between patients and their physicians and physician assistants was a contributing factor to the complaint. I am sure none of that is news to the licensees out there. The Commission has talked repeatedly about this topic over the years – please see [this article](#) from then-Chair of the Commission, John Maldon. When I have spoken to Commission members over the years and asked them what sort of training they received in medical school or PA training with respect to communication skills, there was noticeable difference in responses along demographic lines. Later career physicians or PAs? Not much time, if any, was meaningfully spent on how to communicate with patients. Fast forward to modern medicine and all the challenges physicians and PAs face – increased patient panels, insurance requirements, apps, Dr. Google, emails, chats, et cetera. I am generally loathe to add yet another aspect to the crush of the things licensees need to pay attention to, but it feels like we’re losing something as healthcare evolves. The complaints received by the Commission bear this out. Even if one of these medical students or residents remembers my quiet 30 second plea as they engage with a patient once they have their white coat or complete their residency, it felt worthwhile.

HELMS

After an arduous process, the Department will soon finalize the transition to the Healthcare Enforcement and Licensing Management System (HELMS) from an older legacy system. It has been a long path and not without expense to the DOH and the over 80 healthcare professions and licensed facilities. The most public face of this process for individual physicians and physician assistants – licensing and renewal – transitioned last April. The rollout was not without its bumps in the road, for sure. (One of the more succinct comments came early on – “No”.) The Commission’s licensing staff has worked tirelessly to assist applicants, licensees, residency directors, and hospital administrators over the last 11 months and I want to say thank you to them in this space. As with many information technology projects of this size and scope, you cannot predict with certainty what might go awry when you flip the switch and put it online. The Commission’s licensing staff have represented the very best in civil service in challenging circumstances.

The second major part of this rollout may have actually occurred by the time you read this, but the system is scheduled to go dark on March 18 and come back online on March 24. This rollout will implement a new complaint intake, investigation, and legal case management system – out of sight for the vast majority of applicants and licensees, but important to the Commission’s basic statutory mandate from the Legislature, nonetheless. As the system matures, the Commission is dedicated to providing the very best service it can to licensees and applicants. Please do not hesitate to contact the Commission or me directly (kyle.karinen@wmc.wa.gov) with suggestions for improvement and thank you for your collective patience, support, and encouragement over the past 11 months.

