

Foot Docs Wearing a 35M Golden Slipper

By WILLIAM SHERMAN
(Sixth of a series)

Podiatrists have socked the city for more than \$35 million in the last seven years. The taxpayers are footing the bill for expensive and often unnecessary care, according to the city's Health Department.

A NEWS reporter, posing as a welfare client with a medicaid card, recently asked for a podiatrist at a lower East Side group practice. He found

MEDICAID PROBE

that bills and I-rays come first, before he even took off his socks and shoes.

At the Delancey Medical Building, 80 Delancey St., the "patient" was ushered into a small room on the second floor where a young receptionist took his medicaid card, began filling out an invoice and then said, "We're going to X-ray your feet."

"But I want to see the podiatrist," insisted the patient.

"He's busy; go into that room for X-rays," she ordered.

"You haven't even asked me what's wrong yet, nobody has even seen my feet," he argued.

Says It Doesn't Matter

"It doesn't matter," she said, the city requires that we X-ray everybody's feet before we see them."

The patient refused and a Health Department podiatrist said later, "It's absolutely ridiculous to X-ray someone's feet before you examine them. More important, it's unhealthy to expose someone to radiation unnecessarily."

Stuart Laurence, an attorney for the department, said that some podiatrists were X-raying so many feet without reason at about \$12 a pair, that an



Podiatrist fills in forms after examining reporter's foot at Delancey Medical Building.

NEWS photo by Mel Finkelstein

order had to be issued limiting foot doctors to X-raying no more than 40% of their new patients.

From 1969 through 1971, the city paid podiatrists \$23,094,030 for care of medicaid patients. Much of that sum, said Laurence was billed for unnecessary bandaging, padding, X-raying, orthopedic shoes, and other services.

The podiatry inquiry came as part of THE NEWS'

continuing Medicaid Probe series, an investigation into abuses of the city's \$1.3 billion medical assistance program with the close cooperation of the city's Health and Welfare Departments.

"Many of the high-billing podiatrists have rooms in group medicaid practices where their patients are

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Foot Docs Size Up City, Find It Measures 35M

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generated from other specialists' referrals," said Lawrence.

When THE NEWS reporter re-focused the X-rays, the receptionist, Maggie Rivera, brought in podiatrist Neil Blatt, who said he was "sitting in for somebody else."

Blatt examined the patient's feet, noted a slight rash on the left foot, sprayed it, rubbed some ointment on, bandaged the foot heavily and wrote out two prescriptions. He didn't comment about the X-rays except to say, "They are necessary for diagnosis."

The treatment took five minutes. Such an examination usually costs the city \$5.20, according to the standard Medicaid fee schedule. Including the bandaging and the prescription the bill would total about \$15.

The man Blatt was "sitting in for" was Jay Rosenberg, and Health Department records show that he earned \$69,811 in Medicaid funds in 1971. During the first six months of 1972 he billed for \$43,986, an increase over his previous year's earning rate. That figure made him the number one billing podiatrist out of 702 practicing in the city last year.

Rosenberg works on the same floor with a group of more than 20 other specialists, including a chiropractor, general practitioners, optometrists and dentists. The center is one of the largest in Manhattan and will generate more than \$1 million in Medicaid billing this year.

Saw 50 Patients a Day

A Health Department investigation of Rosenberg's practice last summer showed that on many occasions he was seeing more than 50 patients a day. Department podiatrist Benjamin Watkins maintains that 35 patients per day is the maximum a foot doctor can see to insure quality care.

Rosenberg, records show, also billed for 60 toe jackets during one day's practice. Toe jackets cost the city \$11.20 each. They are made from a plaster cast of a toe, consist of moleskin and fit over the toe like a miniature sock.

The average podiatrist, Watkins said, rarely makes more than four toe jackets a day. The jacket is used in rare cases to prevent severe friction or to protect an arthritic, or deformed joint.

Some of Rosenberg's patients, the investigation revealed, complained that their toe jackets collapsed in a few weeks. The department found that Rosenberg was using polyfoam for the jackets instead of moleskin.

Rosenberg agreed to make a restitution of \$6,000 to the city and to a short suspension from the Medicaid program.

The number two biller for the first six months of last year was Leslie Unger, who works out of offices at 2315 Mermaid Ave., Brooklyn.

An investigation by the depart-

ment shows that Unger was seeing whole families when only one family member requested treatment; was X-raying more than 40 of his patients; was billing twice for services rendered. In one case, he submitted nine bills for one patient. In another incident,

he billed for a fracture when none was evident in an X-ray. He agreed to make a \$12,000 restitution to the city.

Another podiatrist called down to the department for review was Allen Feinberg who billed for more than \$80,000 in 1971 out

of offices at 201 Dyckman St.

A sample review of 210 invoices showed that in 137 cases he billed for "toe slings," a treatment wherein a bandage is wrapped around one toe and then extended around several others to keep the injured toe secure.

A department podiatrist stated that the high number of slings "exceeded by many times" the proportion in the average podiatrist's practice.

Feinberg insisted that each of the 137 patients in a sample "had a hammertoe." The Health Department did not accept his explanation and he was suspended for several months.

NEXT: The Medicaid Kings.

Meet Shamus, the private eye! The more he's roughed up, the rougher he plays!



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