



## Learning to Bend

Lee E. Mortenson

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## FROM THE EDITOR



## Learning to Bend

by Lee E. Mortenson, D.P.A.

**T**here are all sorts of ways to prepare for the coming of managed care. Lary Kilton took an extreme step...he killed himself.

Jim Wade, the outgoing president of the Illinois Medical Oncology Society told me the news just before an ACCC Executive Committee meeting in Chicago. We both knew Lary, Jim far better than I.

Lary was a man of extremes in intellect and ambition. He was extremely bright. Jim says Lary could read a protocol once and know every word. He was well published and had authored a number of protocols for the Illinois Cancer Council. And, Lary had an extreme desire to stay in control of his own fate. He personified the hard-working oncologist who cares for his patients and expects to be rewarded for his expertise, his attention to detail, and the quality of his care.

Lary chose not to be involved with managed care. He was a solo practitioner holding down three offices and a significant case load. This spring 40 percent of his referrals disappeared because of shifts in managed care.

To blame managed care for Lary's death, of course, is inappropriate. None of us can know what brought him to his decision. Regardless, there are a number of new realities for us all to think about.

First, this is a time of incredible stress for the care givers in our community. The paradigm shift is a real one. The system is altering so radically and quickly that many care providers are finding that the stringent demands for cost efficiency may be wearing down the traditional standards of excellence—quality care, precision, control, and attention to detail.

Second, every revolution brings casualties. One such casualty is our collective and individual under-

standing of what matters. At one time, the structure of our facilities was paramount. We worried about how many "this and that's" we had, as well as the credentials of our medical staff and the quality and organization of our program.

Today, we worry about new pre-eminent forces, such as integration, downsizing, capitated contracts, and carve-outs, which appear beyond our control and perhaps in conflict with our values as well as with our traditional system of rewards. If a physician or nurse has spent his or her life preparing for a career as a care giver, what does it mean when the environment changes what it rewards? Are they somehow less valuable?

There is no question that the traditional health care system is imploding. The successful strategies of yesterday are history. The shift will create millionaires and unemployed care givers. For these people and all those in between, change creates terrific potential for personal stress.

"May you live in interesting times" is an old curse. Rapid change of value systems triggers every imaginable response...from embracing opportunity with open arms to uneasiness to suicide.

In our modern, nontribal world, our communities have lost much of their supportive infrastructure established for times of stress. That's why it is important for each of us to take care of ourselves on the deepest level possible and to recognize that our intrinsic value does not change. We must come to understand our contribution to the flow of life and the shadows that hide inside.

Lary's death offers us a reminder of the work we all must do to confront our shadows and walk through them. If we don't, we may break when we might instead bend. ■