

MO-217
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Summary of the movie Damaged Care

A great opening for this movie was the jaw dropping statement made by a surgeon. The surgeon explained the ordering of procedures that a “fat” patient didn’t really need, but they wouldn’t harm her, and bonus points - her insurance would cover all the procedures and it’s income for the hospital. “Doctors scoping for dollars” was the term used by the surgeon.

This movie was based on a true story of a doctor who worked at 2 different HMOs. An HMO is a Health Maintenance Organization and defined a medical insurance group that provides health services for a “fixed annual fee.”

Dr. Linda Peeno had not been in the medical field for a period of time because she got married right out of medical school and started a family; family responsibilities came first. She needed to get back into the working field, because the lawyer fees and court costs for her and her husband to get custody of her step-son was increasing and her husband’s obstetrician paycheck wasn’t covering everything needed for the family. Dr. Peeno chose to apply for and was hired as a medical advisor at Humara, which is a Health Maintenance Organization. This hospital is the same one where Dr. Peeno’s husband works.

A medical advisor is someone who decides whether medical claims will be approved or denied payment to cover patient care, treatments, surgeries etc.

Humara’s management advised Dr. Peeno to deny cases because it cost the hospital too much money, it dug into their profit and their profit margin needed to increase.

The main goals for the HMO’s in these cases, were to save money for the organization not save lives, and more often than not, many cases were denied for example, HMO didn’t want to pay for a voice machine for a patient who suffered many strokes. The strokes caused the patient to be a quadriplegic and unable to speak. Previous to the strokes, this patient had also worked at the same hospital Dr. Peeno worked as the medical advisor.

The machine in question would enable the patient to communicate. Dr. Peeno got the voice machine approved by inviting the doctor who specialized in these voice machines, to attend a meeting and demonstrate how the machine works and how it would improve the life of this patient. Inviting this doctor to the meeting was embarrassing for the hospital because they originally denied approval for the machine.

The patient reached out to the doctor and thanked her for taking a stand for her and being her voice because she was unable to speak for herself.

There was a case involving a man who needed a heart transplant or he would die. A heart was available for immediate transplant. The patient was in the OR ready for the transplant when his surgeon received a phone call from Dr. Peeno, informing him that coverage was denied for the patient due to his employers insurance plan did not cover heart transplant surgery. Dr. Peeno wanted to approve this much needed transplant, but due to the patient's medical insurance policy, she was unable to approve it, and the man died. Dr. Peeno quit her job at Humara.

An additional case involving a very sick infant was denied access to a close by hospital. The mother of the child was told by her insurance company that she would have to use their personal vehicle to take the infant to the hospital ER, because their insurance policy also did not include ambulance coverage. In order to have any services covered for their child, they had to drive to a hospital which was over 50 miles away from their home. The diagnosis for the infant was meningitis and he lost all extremities. If the infant would have been approved to go to the nearest hospital ER, they may have been able to save him from losing all his extremities.

The second job Dr. Peeno applied for she was hired as a medical director. At the beginning of her career there, things were going well; she was able to approve coverage for a time but then things turned out to be the same as Humara did, denying as many claims as possible to save money. Like Humana, saving lives didn't matter to this hospital, what mattered was the bottom line.

Dr. Peeno quit both jobs because of the very unethical practice these HMOs were performing.

Dr. Peeno also went to court as a whistleblower and testified in front of Congress against the prior HMOs where she worked. She also went around the country and spoke about her experience working for HMOs. She was also an expert witness in a lawsuit against one of the HMOs she worked for previously.

Sadly and unfortunately, the denial of patient care continues with HMOs. HMOs are huge profit makers; they are not in the business to save lives.

On a side note: I would not be able to take a job such as a medical advisor for an HMO if what the criteria was to deny medical care when I know it would save a life. I feel a person who could deny saving a person's life, would have to be heartless, ruthless, and have no conscience.