

President's Column

JUDICIAL STRESS

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I stopped working as a sitting judge in December. Two weeks later, I visited my doctor, who told me my blood pressure had dropped 30 points. After some discussion, he suggested that I no longer needed to take blood-pressure medication. The reason it fell so quickly was, of course, that I had stopped the day-to-day work of a sitting judge. Don't mistake me, I loved my job and miss it. But no matter how much you love sitting as a judge, being one is demanding, isolating, and stressful. In fact, a judge's profession is so stressful that New Zealand has placed judges in the high-risk job category. This level of stress can have very negative effects on the health of judges and their families.

A recent study in 2010 identified 12 significant causes of judicial stress.¹ These are (1) workload; (2) high information and documentation requirements; (3) awareness of the possible consequences of judicial error; (4) inadequate lighting; (5) near-vision stress from excessive reading; (6) high responsibility; (7) awareness of self-insecurity due to function and role; (8) time pressure; (9) high demands on quality of work; (10) insufficient technical and material equipment; (11) required pace of work; (12) insufficient work areas. Additionally, between 10 and 25% of the judges in the study also mentioned excessive computer work and working beyond a normal 8-hour day.

In spite of all of the studies showing the high level of stress, judges as a group tend to be in denial. As Judge Robert L. Childers wrote in his article *Even Judges Get the Blues*: "Because of the weight of public expectation, judges generally feel that they should be perfect. Not only do they feel that they should be fair, impartial, and make the right decision 100 percent of the time, but the public expects this of judges as well, as do the lawyers who practice before them. This can create undue pressure for judges and, consciously or unconsciously, keep judges from admitting or recognizing the signs of debilitating disease."² These different stressors impact both the judge's job and home life. In smaller jurisdictions, judges have no privacy. Everything the judge does at work and at home is the subject of local gossip, so when a judge experiences work or family conflicts, those

conflicts are often revealed to the entire community.

In larger jurisdictions, the media are often interested in using a judge's behavior or family problems to drive readership or viewers. For example, many judges have experienced the effect of a negative press reaction to a judicial decision. And still others have read about a spouse or child on the front page of the local paper merely because the person is a member of the judge's family.

Recognizing the health risk of judicial stress is only the first step. A judge needs to develop ways to combat stress. A noted expert on judicial stress, Dr. Isaiah M. Zimmerman, has suggested this can include (1) maintaining a close support circle of relatives and friends who are not competitive or envious and with whom you can engage in robust and honest mutual appraisal and dialogue; (2) taking initiative to engage in activities totally removed from the legal and judicial world and to form friendships with some of the people you will meet in this way; (3) learning the basics of stress-management techniques so that you can work efficiently but not pay too high a price for it; and (4)

periodically serving as a mentor to a new judge, so that you can teach by example most of these points. Stress is an inherent part of the position judges hold. But it can be understood, and its impact can be managed to reduce health and family problems.³

As part of the AJA's efforts at Making Better Judges®, our entire educational program at the midyear meeting on April 24, 2015, will focus on judicial stress and its impact on judges and their families. These education sessions will delve into the causes of judicial stress and ways to reduce it. Please think about joining your fellow judges in Fort Meyers, Florida, and learning how you can manage your stress and make yourself a better judge. And once you understand how helpful the AJA's educational conferences can be, perhaps you will also join us October 4-7 at the Sheraton hotel in downtown Seattle, Washington, for our annual conference.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to read this column, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the articles in this issue of *Court Review*.



Footnotes

1. Monica Silvia Ciocoiu, Mirela Cojocaru & S.V. Ciocoiu, *Implications of Levels of Stress Factors in the Magistrate's Activity*, 15 ROMANIAN BIOTECHNOLOGICAL LETTERS 126 (2010), available at <http://www.rombio.eu/rbl3vol15Supplement/18.Ciocoiu%20Monica.pdf>.
2. Robert L. Childers, *Even Judges Get the Blues*, HIGHLIGHTS (ABA

Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs), Summer 2009, at 2, available at <http://goo.gl/LcLH87>.

3. See generally Isaiah M. Zimmerman, *Helping Judges in Distress*, 90 JUDICATURE 10 (2006); Isaiah M. Zimmerman, *Isolation in the Judicial Career*, CT. REV., Winter 2009, at 10; Isaiah M. Zimmerman, *Stress: What It Does and How It Can Be Lessened*, JUDGES' J., Summer 1981, at 4.