Risk Management

Subsequent Therapist Syndrome:
Are we each our own worst enemy?

By Ofer Zur, Ph.D.

I have coined the term “Subsequent Therapist Syndrome” (STS) to refer to those circumstances where the subsequent (current, next or new) psychotherapist may act unethically or even illegally when providing an “expert opinion” regarding a former therapist’s (supposedly) unethical or illegal conduct.

These are the cases where the subsequent therapist’s evaluation and judgment are solely based on personal theoretical bias, rigid view of therapeutic boundaries, and/or a client’s self-report. These are the situations where the “ST” arrives at firm and clear conclusions without reviewing the psychotherapy records or other relevant collateral evidence – or without consulting the former therapist.

While this is a serious, destructive professional phenomenon among psychotherapists, the term which I coined, Subsequent Therapist Syndrome, is somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

Of course, some therapists do cross the line of decency and exploit or harm their clients. Needless to say, these therapists must be sanctioned appropriately and their clients must be protected. I coined the term Subsequent Therapist Syndrome to identify situations where, regrettably, self-righteous mental health practitioners are eager to tell their current clients that their former therapists acted unethically or illegally just because the former therapist used different approaches, methodologies or interventions than the ones to which the subsequent (current) therapist subscribes.

Without the actual data and the basis to develop an informed opinion, the ST proceeds to put fire underneath the client and urges, encourages and supports them to file a board complaint and/or civil malpractice suit.

Psychotherapists, as a group, have not been known to be highly tolerant or flexible. In spite of the token commitment to individual differences and cultural diversity, psychotherapists often fail to acknowledge or say, “I disagree.” Instead, they inaccurately say, “It is unethical.”

In my long experience as a forensic and expert witness, I have come across numerous times when subsequent therapists con-