
The academic background of Robert Henley Woody, the author of Protecting Your Mental Health Practice: How to Minimize Legal and Financial Risk, is impeccable. He is an attorney; he has a Ph.D. in counseling psychology and in health services administration; and he has completed post-doctoral fellowships in clinical psychology and group psychotherapy. The works of academicians of his caliber often sound as if they were translated from German, but Woody’s writing style is crisp, clear, interesting, and even humorous.

When discussing the purpose of the book, Woody writes, “I have constructed a framework within which the practitioner can obtain a reasonable degree of security. In addition to providing the academic bases for ideas, I have emphasized practical suggestions for risk management” (p. xvi). Woody introduces a new sociolegal term, litigaphobia (his italics), and provides solid evidence that this newly discovered phobia is reality-based. Throughout the book, he includes examples of both legitimate and nuisance suits directed against practitioners of a variety of mental health disciplines.

Because, as Woody reveals, no mental health discipline has escaped the recent litigation frenzy, his intended audience is very large indeed. The book, in his words, is “designed for mental health professionals at all levels, from senior practitioners to beginning graduate student, and for health care workers in all disciplines: psychologists (in all clinical specialties), social workers (with both micro and macro commitments), mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, sex therapists, physicians, nurses, and psychoeducational personnel in the schools. Likewise, the information
should be useful in all employment contexts, such as private practice, general or psychiatric hospitals, mental health clinics, social and health agencies, and schools" (p. xvii). Woody specifically states that he intends for unhappy clients to read his book. Although he does not mention it, this book should also prove quite helpful to mental health administrators.

Woody employs three major strategies for maintaining the interest of his readers. First, his writing follows a consistent pattern. He articulates an abstract legal concern followed by a practical example. The examples come from his own experience or from past litigation (some landmark dispositions, others not). Second, he has a habit of listing. His lists have a tendency to produce effortless understanding for the reader, and they demonstrate the impressive organization of his thoughts. Third, he adds a bit of humor to keep the reader involved in a topic that typically invokes profound fear. For example, in discussing "types and amount of damages," Woody writes:

As noted in the four elements of negligence, there must be actual loss or damage. First, the plaintiff must have standing to sue, meaning that he or she has a legally acceptable connection to the cause of action and injury. Second, there must be a compensable injury. In litigation, "relief" is spelled, as would be guessed, "M-O-N-E-Y." The purpose of damages is compensatory. . . (p. 119).

The book includes 10 chapters divided into three sections that address the following topics: Ethical, Regulatory, and Liability; Business Issues; Strategies for Managing Risk and Avoiding Malpractice.

Woody does an excellent job in providing transitions among sections, chapters and topical areas within chapters. Three chapters in particular stand out: Developing a Legally Safe Record System; Reducing Risk with Dangerous Clients; Avoiding Sexual Impropriety.
The table of contents includes a detailed outline of the material found in each chapter. This is extremely helpful for the practitioner who rereads sections or who desires specific and quick information.

The rapid proliferation of litigation against mental health practitioners has created a need for Woody’s work. Clients are served because Woody clearly articulates business and treatment approaches that are likely to help them in court. He warns clients about nuisance suits and reveals how a mental health practitioner can successfully counter-sue. A typical scenario that he discusses pertains to the practitioner who requests payment for services rendered and who, instead of getting paid, is sued by the client for offering inadequate services.

Practitioners are provided with two potent strategies: “risk management” and “defensive clinical practice.” Woody has a multidimensional definition of risk management. It includes: (1) ethical and statutory standards; (2) impression management directed toward both the public and the profession; and (3) effective business and personnel management. Defensive clinical practice is a concept/process by which practitioners establish safeguards for personal and family safety (physical danger may, for example, emanate from a client experiencing a psychotic episode).

*Protecting Your Mental Health Practice: How to Minimize Legal and Financial Risk* is, in sum, a most useful book that serves a varied audience. I recommend its purchase by academic and public libraries. It should also be required reading for graduate students anticipating a career in mental health. Mental health facilities (both public and private) should include the book in their in-house libraries and should encourage or require their staff to read it.