

Not Enough Hours in the Day

School of Medicine – Transition to Residency – Professionalism, Ethics & Law

It is 9 pm. The ICU intern has just worked up two patients and is nearing the end of his shift. He is writing the documentation for one of his admissions when two patients are admitted simultaneously to the ICU, both unstable. The covering resident starts to evaluate both patients, and tells the intern to finish his write-ups and go home.

It is a common occurrence for the program's trainees to work longer than an 80 hour work week and the resident reminds the intern to not exceed these work hour rules set by the ACGME*. The Program Director for the residency has recently emphasized how the accreditation of the program is dependent on the interns and residents leaving on time.

The intern finishes one write-up, has one more to do, and is about out of time (in more ways than one). In addition to ACGME issues, the intern had agreed to drive 3 friends to a long-awaited music concert. The friends have been waiting in the hospital lobby, have no other means of transportation and are concerned that their \$80 tickets will go to waste.

Both newly admitted patients are now crashing and the resident looks overwhelmed. The intern feels torn, wanting to stay and help the resident but also wanting to respect ACGME rules and commitments made to friends.

1. Why does the ACGME set work hour limits knowing that situations like this might arise?

2. How might the intern and resident manage this situation?

The intern calls the chief resident who happens to be just arriving at the same concert and counsels the intern to stay and take care of the patients and then downgrade recorded work hours.

3. Many times specific circumstances can be traced to system problems. Are there system changes that might help prevent such difficulties in the future?