Thoughts on Disability Insurance From a Disabled Doctor

[Editor’s Note: This is a guest post from a regular reader of this site who is a disabled physician. This doc wishes to remain anonymous, but owns StatusPostMD.com. We have no financial relationship. I have partnered with Pattern in providing this crash course video on disability insurance below. After reading this post you will see why it is important to get DI as soon as possible. ]

My goal in writing this piece is to encourage every doctor, especially newly minted ones, to get disability insurance as soon as possible. Here’s why.

The Initial Injury

Like all of you, I worked very hard to get through medical school. During my second year, while taking a jog in between rounds of “burying” my face in a textbook, I twisted my ankle – just a simple inversion injury. However, weeks went by and my foot and ankle were in excruciating pain from this trivial
trauma. There was some swelling but nothing too significant. I went to doctor after doctor and there was no clear diagnosis. The pain was so bad I had to put my foot and ankle in buckets of ice just so I could study for my exams. Ultimately, I had a surgical procedure done during the 2 week vacation period between 2nd and 3rd years.

Months after the surgery, my pain continued – and I continued dunking my leg in buckets of ice to be able to study and bear standing at my rotations. After about 3 more months of formal physical therapy, I did everything I could to avoid and ignore the pain – hoping it would resolve. I think sometime during my fourth year the pain spontaneously lessened – it never went away but it did lessen significantly. Thank goodness for miracles! As a result, fourth year was a blast for me – a kind of rebirth from the misery I lived over the previous year and a half.

**Buying Disability Insurance as an Intern**

After graduation, I started residency and dove head first into learning my specialty and never looked back. One of the first things I did as a resident was to get as much disability insurance as I could at that time. I found the right insurance agent and learned what to look for in a policy before finally deciding on one. While I still had some residual pain constantly, I happily graduated residency and increased coverage.

Fast forward 7 years into my career (and life) and for no reason at all my ankle started hurting again – it was very painful. This episode turned into a repeat of my medical school experience and culminated in another surgery that once again did not alleviate what it was intended to alleviate – the pain!
Filing the Claim

At this point, I was no longer able to exist, let alone stand, without excruciating pain. Nothing relieved this pain. It turned out, for some unknown reason, that I had developed severe damage to my peripheral nerves. One thing was sure though, I could no longer work as a physician and had to file a disability claim. After much friction and obstruction from my insurance company (which was supposed to be the most physician-friendly insurance company), my claim was accepted and I began receiving my benefits.

My Policy

When I originally purchased my policy through Berkshire Life Insurance Company (a subsidiary of Guardian Life Insurance), I paid for the maximum benefit amount at that time (1997) for a Family Physician – which was just over six thousand dollars per month. I didn’t stop there, however, as I made sure to add (purchase) the COLA rider or the Cost of Living Adjustment rider. This add-on to the policy made sure that my benefit increased yearly based on a specific index of inflation or a fixed rate (beginning at the time of disability). As a result, over the years that my policy has been in force, my monthly benefit has increased from the original six thousand dollars to just north of eight thousand dollars a month today.
And keep in mind that, since I never claimed my $400 monthly premium payments as a tax deduction (most docs can’t anyway), I receive my benefits completely tax-free (consult your accountant for specifics please). So receiving eight thousand dollars a month in disability benefits is comparable to making about eleven or twelve thousand dollars a month pre-tax (of course the actual amount depends on your personal tax rate). Also, keep in mind that today it is possible for Family Physicians (and other specialists) to obtain a policy with a significantly higher initial benefit amount than I was able to procure 20 years ago. For example, benefit amounts now can start at about ten thousand dollars per month.

**Disabled Life**

Fast forward another 10 years and I continue to have chronic pain – that’s over 20 years of pain. It has not been an easy ride, and it would have been an absolutely disastrous ride had I not obtained disability insurance once I started residency. Since chronic pain is not predictable, my ability to work was not dependable. Therefore, my working income had become inconsistent. And without my disability benefit, there were times I would not have been able to pay the most basic of life’s bills. That is why I am here to tell all physicians, especially young ones and those just starting residency, to get disability insurance right now if you don’t have it. Research insurance agents; there are ones that specialize in physician disability insurance. Then, get the best policy from the best company that you can. Do not wait. I mean it.

Obviously, my case had some early foreshadowing of trouble, with my pain starting in medical school. But not everybody’s disability is going to be the same. No two situations are alike. Some come in the form of physiologic pathologies and others in the form of accidental injuries. Think about all the MVA (motor vehicle accident) patients that doctors treat on a
daily basis. Some of them are minor problems while others are serious and life-altering injuries. Don’t gamble and falsely believe that a serious disability can’t happen to you. There is no way to predict who will become disabled, but without the right disability insurance policy, you could lose everything you worked so hard for. Believe me, I know.

[Editor’s Note: When I speak to groups of residents and even attending physicians and ask those who have disability insurance to raise their hands, I’m always surprised to see how many don’t have any policy at all. Here on this site we delve into the nitty-gritty of disability policies and argue about riders and benefits and companies. But all that pales in comparison to the most important thing (at least if you’re not financially independent or married to another high earner and living on only one income)- getting ANY disability policy in place! Please, if you need disability insurance and don’t have it yet, go do it this week.]

What do you think? Do you have disability insurance? Why or why not? When did you buy it? Have you used it? Have you wished you had bought it earlier? Comment below!