

Tips for Avoiding Legal Malpractice & Surviving Grievances

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Introduction - Tips for Avoiding Legal Malpractice and Surviving Grievances

Lawyers are busier than ever. Courts issue opinions and orders multiple times per week. We are expected to keep up with procedural law, the substantive law that controls disposition of our clients' legal matters, and the law controlling our ethical duties to our clients. Those ethical duties are spelled out in numerous different ways. Court opinions construing attorney fiduciary duties, professional negligence, fraud and the like provide some of that guidance. The Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct, the ethical opinions that construe them, and restatements, cases, statutes, and rules from other jurisdictions all form part of the kaleidoscope of information that we must process in order to assure that we meet the ethical obligations that we owe to our clients and to the legal system as a whole.

This paper is an effort to help Texas attorneys stay current with new ethics information that has become available over the past month or months, or year or years, as the case may be. It is a good start to assisting the average practitioner in meeting his or her ethical obligations to his or her clients, and to the legal system as a whole. With that, let's explore 50 everyday strategies that lawyers can use to avoid professional misconduct.

1. Do not give dispositive weight to an American Bar Association ethics opinion that is right on point.

Meador, In re:, 968 S.W.2d 346, 349, fn. 1 (Tex. 1998) (orig. proceeding):

This ten-person standing committee of the American Bar Association is charged with "interpreting the professional standards of the Association and recommending appropriate amendments and clarifications...." ANNOTATED MODEL RULES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT viii (ABA Center for Professional Responsibility, 3d ed.1996). It issues advisory opinions on ethics questions of general interest submitted by attorneys. *See id.*; *see also* Klein, Legal Malpractice, Professional Discipline, and Representation of the Indigent Defendant, 61 TEMP. L. REV. 1171, 1179 n. 54 (1988). While the Committee's opinions are often cited as persuasive authority by state disciplinary bodies, the opinions do not bind those bodies. *See, e.g.*, ABA INFORMAL OP. 1420 (1978) ("Enforcement of legal ethics and disciplinary procedures are local matters securely within the jurisdictional prerogative of each state and the District of Columbia."); Hellman, When "Ethics Rules" Don't Mean What They Say: The Implications of Strained ABA Ethics Opinions, 10 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 317, 326 (1997) ("ABA opinions are binding upon no one. ABA opinions represent the views of a small committee of a private association, and they construe that private association's Model Rules and Model Code. The power to determine whether and to what extent either of these model documents will be put into force in any state is exercised by a state authority, most commonly the state's highest court." (notes omitted)).

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