

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF OHIO

CINCINNATI BAR ASSOCIATION,	:	Case No. 2012-0684
Relator,	:	
v.	:	
	:	
KATHLEEN D. MEZHER	:	
& FRANK ERIC ESPOHL,	:	
Respondents	:	

**RELATOR'S ANSWER BRIEF TO RESPONDENTS' OBJECTIONS TO THE
FINDINGS OF FACT, CONCLUSIONS OF LAW AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS ON GRIEVANCES AND DISCIPLINE**

James F. Brockman (#0009469)
312 Walnut St.
Ste. 3100
Cincinnati, OH 45202
513-421-6630
jbrockman@lindhorstlaw.com

Thomas W. Condit (#0041299)
P.O. Box 12700
Cincinnati, OH 45202
513-731-1230
twcondit@fuse.net

Counsel for Relator

Counsel for Respondent Kathleen Mezher

Katherine C. Morgan (#0068184)
1 Neumann Way
MDJ104
Cincinnati, OH 45215
513-243-3740
Katherine.morgan@ge.com

Frank E. Espohl (#0065957)
Kathleen Mezher & Associates
8075 Beechmont Ave.
Cincinnati, OH 45255
513-474-3700

Co-Counsel for Relator

Respondent, Pro Se

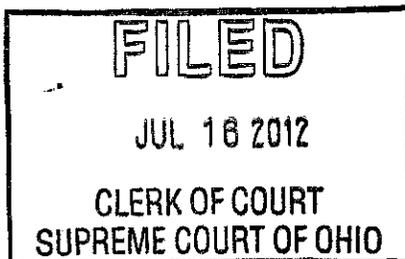
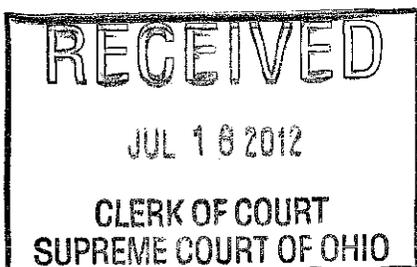


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STATEMENT OF FACTS

The Free Consultation

On February 3, 2011, Jessica Burns, her sister, Stephanie Burns Mahaffey, and her sister's husband, Bryan Mahaffey, met with Respondent Frank Espohl in Respondent Kathleen D. Mezher's law office for a free consultation regarding the sisters' mother's estate. (Burns Dep. 4-5, Dec. 13, 2011.) Also present was Michael Mezher, a non-attorney employed at the firm. (*Id.* at 7.) Ms. Burns and Ms. Mahaffey chose to meet with Respondent Mezher's law firm not only because their mother's documents had been drafted there, but specifically because the firm's website advertised a free consultation. (Mahaffey Dep. 19, Dec. 13, 2011.) Ms. Mahaffey stated that reading the firm's website led her to view the consultation as "an interview for an attorney." (*Id.* at 27.)

Both sisters recalled that at the consultation, Mr. Mezher did most of the talking, and that the discussion was a general outline of the probate process. (Burns Dep. 7-8, 20; Mahaffey Dep. 10.) Respondent Espohl took notes and was handed the original will, trust, and death certificates. (Burns Dep. 7, 24-25; Mahaffey Dep. 13.) When Ms. Mahaffey asked about legal fees, the sisters were told that the fees would be dictated by the probate court, but neither Respondent Espohl nor Mr. Mezher gave them the Clermont County Probate Court fee guidelines. (Mahaffey Dep. 11.) For the duration of the meeting, the sisters assumed the consultation was free, as advertised on Respondent Mezher's website. (Burns Dep. 9; Mahaffey Dep. 15.) After about thirty minutes, the

sisters decided to move forward with hiring Respondent Mezher's law firm to handle their mother's estate, and Ms. Burns, as executor of their mother's estate, signed a probate fee agreement. (Burns Dep. 9; Mahaffey Dep. 11-12.)¹ It is undisputed that nowhere in the agreement was there any mention of quantum meruit or other fees. In contrast, the firm's fee agreement for bankruptcy matters specifically mentions quantum meruit by name. (Relator's Ex. 8, Dec. 29, 2011; Hr'g Tr. 43, Mar. 13, 2012.) Neither Respondent Espohl nor Mr. Mezher informed the sisters at any point during the free consultation that they would be charged for any part of it. (Burns Dep. 9; Mahaffey Dep. 16.; Hr'g Tr. 61; Board's Findings of Fact ¶19, June 11, 2012)

The Surprise Charge For The Free Consultation

In late February 2011, Ms. Burns called the Mezher law firm to retrieve her original documents, as the sisters no longer wished to use the firm for their mother's estate. (Burns Dep. 10.) Ms. Burns went to the office with a friend on a Saturday to pick up the documents, and spoke with Mr. Mezher. (*Id.* at 11.) Mr. Mezher asked why she no longer wanted to work with the law firm, and her response was that she and her sister were unclear about a few things and felt uneasy with using the law firm. (*Id.* at 12.) He presented Ms. Burns with an itemized bill amounting to \$375.00, \$125.00 of which was described as case research and letters, dated February 7, 2011. (*Id.* at 13.) The remaining \$250.00 was described as "Atty – Conference," and

¹ The sisters' recollection of the events at the consultation is markedly different from the version provided by Respondent Espohl. Most notably, the sisters both allege that Respondent Espohl never left the room during the consultation, (Burns Dep. 25; Mahaffey Dep. 22.) and that they left the law office within thirty minutes, promptly after signing the fee agreement. (Burns Dep. 21, 24; Mahaffey Dep. 28.) Respondent Espohl contends that he left the room to spend an additional thirty minutes working on the Estate after the fee agreement was signed (Hr'g Tr. 60.). Although the Board cited Respondent Espohl's account of the consultation as "the most reasonable explanation of what transpired," (Board's Findings of Fact ¶15.) a finding which Relator respectfully disputes, the Board correctly held that even when Respondent Espohl's version of events is accepted, clear rule violations occurred here.

was dated February 3, 2011, the date of the free consultation. (*Id.*; Relator's Ex. 5.) Ms. Burns asked Mr. Mezher why she was being charged for a free conference, and he told her that she could not have her documents back until she paid the \$250.00. (Burns Dep. 13.) He then told her it was time to leave, and Ms. Burns left the office visibly upset. (*Id.* at 15, 28.) Her friend returned, paid \$375.00, and retrieved the documents for her. (*Id.* at 15.)

The Issues Before The Panel And The Board Of Commissioners on Grievance and Discipline And The Board's Ultimate Determination

Pursuant to Relator's First Amended Complaint, filed on December 12, 2011, the issues before the Panel and Board were as follows:

- (1) Whether Respondents Mezher and Espohl violated Rule 1.5(b) of the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct by failing to communicate to the client the basis of the fee by failing to communicate any limitations on the "free consultation" and by failing to provide a sufficient explanation for the basis of the probate court fee; and
- (2) Whether Respondents Mezher and Espohl violated Rule 7.1 of the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct by making a false and/or misleading communication about the lawyer's services by advertising a "free consultation" and subsequently charging for what the client reasonably understood to be the "free consultation."²

Following a March 13, 2012 hearing before a three member Panel, the Board reviewed the Panel's recommendations and filed its Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law, and Recommendation on April 19, 2012. Based on the Panel's recommendation, Board found that Respondent Mezher violated Rule 7.1 and that Respondent Espohl violated Rule 1.5(b). The

² Relator denies Respondent Mezher's assertion (Mezher Objection Brief, p. 11, fn.4) that it made a false allegation in its original Complaint and that probable cause might not have been found in the absence of one sentence, later deleted in the Amended Complaint. See Complaint at ¶ 8. In fact, Relator took the opportunity to clarify the original Complaint based upon additional discovery and Respondent Mezher's deposition. The facts as alleged in both the original and the amended Complaints were sufficient to establish violations of the rules at issue.

Board adopted the Panel's recommendation of a public reprimand for both Respondents and imposition of the costs of the proceedings taxed to them.

Following the Supreme Court's Order to Show Cause, Respondents filed objections on June 11, 2012, to which Relator now responds. The time for Relator to respond was extended by agreement of the parties.

ARGUMENT

PROPOSITION OF LAW I

RESPONDENT MEZHER'S CONDUCT IN ADVERTISING A FREE CONSULTATION AND SUBSEQUENTLY CHARGING FOR IT WAS INHERENTLY MISLEADING, AND THE BOARD'S FINDING THAT RESPONDENT MEZHER VIOLATED RULE 7.1 SHOULD BE UPHELD

Rule 7.1 states:

A lawyer shall not make or use a false, misleading, or nonverifiable communication about the lawyer or the lawyer's services. A communication is false or misleading if it contains a material misrepresentation of fact or law or *omits a fact necessary to make the statement considered as a whole not materially misleading*. Prof.Cond.R. 7.1 (emphasis added).³

As correctly determined by the Panel and Board, Respondent Mezher violated this rule by advertising a free consultation on her website, with no stated limitations, and subsequently charging a client for what the client reasonably understood to be a free consultation, without any prior disclosure or indication to the client that there might be a charge. The Board's finding is supported by clear and convincing evidence.

In *Zauderer v. Office of Disciplinary Counsel*, 471 U.S. 626, 652, 105 S.Ct. 2265, 85 L.Ed.2d 652 (1985), the United States Supreme Court found an attorney in violation of a rule

³ The factors to be considered in determining the reasonableness of a fee are well established, as the 2007 Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct repeat, verbatim, the factors adopted by this Court in the 1970 Code of Professional Responsibility. One of those factors – “the results obtained” – demonstrates that the Board and this Court will conduct such review with the benefit of hindsight. *See* Prof.Cond.R. 1.5(a)(4) and DR 2-106(B)(4).

prohibiting false or deceptive statements because his advertisement failed to inform clients that they would be liable for costs (as opposed to legal fees) even if their claims were unsuccessful. In concluding that the advertisement was misleading, the Court noted the ease with which members of the public may be misled by legal terms of art such as “legal fees” and “costs,” terms that in ordinary usage are often interchangeable. *Id.*

In *Office of Disciplinary Counsel v. Shane*, 81 Ohio St.3d 494, 497, 692 N.E.2d 571 (1998), which followed *Zauderer*, an attorney’s television commercials suffered from similar deficiencies. The commercials didn’t “inform the public that, win or lose, clients who enter into contingent fee contracts are responsible for costs and expenses of their cases.” *Id.* The Court stated that a fine line existed between a law firm’s right to advertise and “the law firm’s duty not to mislead the public or overreach in its zeal to obtain clients.” *Id.*

As cases like *Zauderer* and *Shane* have shown, clients, as lay people, must be informed of what they might be charged when attorney advertisements offer some sort of free service. Otherwise, advertisements become misleading to those who do not possess an attorney’s knowledge of legal fees and costs.

In the case at hand, the term “free consultation” on its own is not inherently misleading, since most reasonable clients would assume upon reading it, as did Ms. Mahaffey and Ms. Burns, that their visit would be free. However, the rule violation occurred when Ms. Burns was handed a bill after the free consultation – the one and only meeting the sisters had with the firm – that stated “Atty – Conference” with a \$250.00 charge next to it. (Relator’s Ex. 5.) Nowhere on the bill was there any notation of the supposedly free consultation. (*Id.*) The bill failed to account for and separate the free portion of the consultation and the portion that was charged. (*Id.*)

Furthermore, the sisters both testified that no one, in any way, shape or form, told them on February 3 that they would be charged for any time spent at the office that day. (Burns Dep. 9; Mahaffey Dep. 16.) Any reasonable client presented with the same bill after a “free consultation” would feel equally misled, as the decision to end the “free” portion and begin charging for the meeting was arbitrary and was not communicated to the sisters.

Just as the advertisements in *Zauderer* and *Shane* were misleading because they failed to inform clients that they could still be charged with the costs of litigation, Respondent Mezher’s website advertisement failed to provide clients with a clear line of demarcation between the free consultation and the possibility of a billable event during a first meeting. Moreover, in the fee agreement Ms. Burns signed, no mention was made of any potential fees beyond those set by the Clermont County Probate Court, and at no time in the February 3 meeting did Respondents inform their clients that they would begin charging for the meeting. Ms. Burns and Ms. Mahaffey had no basis from which to assume they would be charged for the February 3 free consultation, as the plain meaning of the website advertisement and the actions of Respondent Mezher’s employees indicated that the consultation was free.

Personal Contact With The Clients Was Not A Prerequisite For Respondent Mezher To Have Misled Them

Respondent Mezher argues that she did not mislead Ms. Burns and Ms. Mahaffey because she had no personal contact with them. From a common sense standpoint, this is an invalid assertion. Respondent Mezher, as the owner of her firm, is responsible for its website and for properly training her attorneys and non-attorney subordinates in adhering to the website’s advertised content. Respondent admits in her testimony that she trains her attorneys in conducting and wrapping up free consultations, which clearly shows she takes responsibility for

regulating them. (Hr’g Tr. p. 34.) Furthermore, the bill Ms. Burns received has Respondent Mezher’s name printed in a large font at the top of it. (Relator’s Ex. 5.)

Quantum Meruit Is Inapplicable

Respondent Mezher argues that quantum meruit billing is not a misleading practice, with which Relator wholly agrees. The issue is that the clients in this case were charged for a consultation that was presented to them as free. They had no qualms with paying for the services that were performed a few days after the February 3 free consultation. However, the sisters had no reason to expect any fees on the February 3 date, since the meeting was presented to them as free, it is undisputed that they were never advised that charges would begin accumulating at a certain point, and the agreement they signed did not provide any information on fees beyond those set by the probate court (in contrast to the firm’s other agreements, which mention quantum meruit by name). Since the February 3 consultation was free, quantum meruit does not apply.

Respondent Mezher’s Promissory Estoppel And Due Process Arguments Are Without Basis

Respondent Mezher also raises promissory estoppel and due process arguments, both of which are without basis. Respondent herself admits that the promissory estoppel argument is waived because it was never argued at any other stage of the proceedings. (Mezher Objections 19.)

Respondent Mezher objects to the Board’s finding that she “had approved the website information, which, without further explanation of the firm’s policies, was inherently misleading.” (Board’s Findings of Fact ¶12.) At hearing, her counsel posited: “Kathleen Mezher has no culpability in any phase of anything that happened unless you can say as a matter

of fact or law that the words free consultation are a violation.” (Hr’g Tr. p.248) This argument hinges on a semantic red herring and ignores the law of Ohio. *Zauderer* and its progeny tell us that it is not the plain meaning of words, studied in a vacuum, which constitute misconduct; the context in which they are used and the result obtained must also be considered. After Respondent Mezher’s testimony at hearing, Commissioner Bauer put this issue in perspective:

“I think what I’m most concerned about, and it perhaps presents a cautionary tail [sic], you’ve got a situation that’s created with the hook on the website, Call us for a free consultation, and whether it be this situation or any other situation, you have people come in, and based upon your three triggers, you have people who are there for what they believe is a free consultation. And in fact that free consultation can turn into a fee-generating conference based upon the trigger. . . .” (Hr’g Tr. pp.217-218)

Respondent Mezher also argues that advertisements cannot be expected to advise the public of all possible contingencies that could arise out of a fee agreement. While listing every potential fee is not necessary, *Zauderer* makes it a reasonable requirement that “information regarding the client’s liability for costs be disclosed.” *Zauderer*, 471 U.S. 626, 653. To avoid being misleading, Respondent needed to either make it clear in the advertisement that the free consultation was subject to time constraints, or make it her firm’s policy to let clients know, at the proper time, that the free portion of the consultation was over. It is undisputed that neither occurred here.

Respondent Mezher also suggests that the Board violated due process by allowing the depositions of Ms. Burns, Ms. Mahaffey, and Mr. Mahaffey to appear in video form at the hearing. However, the record reflects that the depositions were taken pursuant to agreement, and that both current and prior counsel for Respondent were present and had the opportunity to cross-examine the witnesses. (Burns Dep. 3; Mahaffey Dep. 3.) Neither Respondent Mezher or Respondent Espohl objected at hearing to the use of the videos at hearing, and Respondent

Mezher's counsel actually asked that the videos be played as part of her case in chief. (Hr'g Tr. pp. 6, 80-81)

PROPOSITION OF LAW II

RESPONDENT ESPOHL FAILED TO COMMUNICATE WITH HIS CLIENTS REGARDING THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF HIS REPRESENTATION AND THE BASIS OR RATE OF FEES, AND THE BOARD'S FINDING THAT RESPONDENT ESPOHL VIOLATED RULE 1.5(B) SHOULD BE UPHELD

Rule 1.5(b) states that "the nature and scope of the representation and the basis or rate of the fee and expenses for which the client will be responsible shall be communicated to the client, preferably in *writing*, before or within a *reasonable* time after commencing the representation." Prof.Cond.R. 1.5(b).

The Clients Reasonably Understood The Consultation To Be An Attorney Interview, Wherein No Legal Advice Was Given

Respondent Espohl asserts that Ms. Burns and Ms. Mahaffey understood that when they signed the fee agreement, the free consultation was over. In fact, the record as to what the sisters understood regarding the consultation indicates otherwise. Ms. Mahaffey viewed the consultation as an interview for an attorney (Mahaffey Dep. 27.), and both sisters confirm that no legal advice was given during the consultation, either by Respondent or by Mr. Mezher. (Burns Dep. 8; Mahaffey Dep. 26.) Ms. Burns states that Respondent "sat there and nodded most of the time" (Burns Dep. 20.) while Mr. Mezher, a non-lawyer, did most of the talking. (*Id.* at 7; Mahaffey Dep. 10.) These statements are supported by the fact that Respondent Espohl admits he took very minimal notes during the consultation. (Relator's Ex. 3; Hr'g Tr. 65.)

Once the sisters signed the fee agreement, Respondent Espohl further admits he failed to inform them that the free portion of the consultation was over and that he was going to begin charging them. (Hr’g Tr. 61; Board’s Findings of Fact ¶19.) Respondent Espohl argues that the sisters understood that once the fee agreement was signed, he would begin working on the case. (Espohl Objections 9, June 11, 2012.) However, his testimony at hearing belies this assertion. Commissioner Bauer asked Respondent Espohl: “Do you tell them when they sign the agreement that from now on any time that’s spent on your file could result in the generation of fees to you or your firm? And that’s a yes or no question.” Respondent answered: “I would have to say no.” (Hr’g Tr. p.187)

Further undisputed is that Respondent Espohl failed to keep contemporaneous time records of when the meeting started and of his time spent working on the case. (Hr’g Tr. 66.) He only came up with a figure for his time spent on the case a few weeks later, when Mr. Mezher told him a bill had to be put together since the sisters were discharging the firm. (*Id.* at 67-68.) The firm, comprised of no more than four attorneys, conducted 1600 free consultations in 2011. (*Id.* at 34-35.) With such a large volume of free consultations, it is highly improbable that Respondent Espohl was able to recall with any measure of accuracy the time he spent working on a consultation that took place weeks earlier. This is reflected in the bill Ms. Burns received when she went to the firm to retrieve her documents, which fails to make any mention of the free consultation or indicate how long the \$250.00 “Atty – Conference” lasted. (Relator’s Ex. 5.)

In light of the facts, Ms. Burns’ confusion regarding the attorney conference fee was entirely warranted. She was obviously perplexed as to why she was being charged for a consultation that had been advertised as free, and as indicated by *Zauderer*, “when the possibility of deception is as self-evident as it is in this case, we need not require the state to conduct a

survey of the...public before it may determine that the advertisement had a tendency to mislead.”
Zauderer, 471 U.S. 626, 652-653.

Quantum Meruit Is Inapplicable

Respondent Espohl argues that quantum meruit is the legally imposed measure for compensating the attorney for services rendered prior to the discharge. As discussed in Proposition of Law I, Relator does not disagree with this proposition. However, quantum meruit is inapplicable to this situation. Ms. Burns was entirely willing to pay for the legal services performed after the February 3 free consultation on a quantum meruit basis. Nonetheless, quantum meruit is inapplicable to a free legal service.

The Firm’s Website Advertising A “Free Consultation” Became Misleading When The Firm Charged Ms. Burns For A Free Consultation

Respondent Espohl argues that the firm’s website is not deceptive or misleading. However, as discussed in Proposition of Law I, the website advertisement became misleading when Ms. Burns was presented a bill for what she reasonably assumed to be a free consultation, as advertised on Respondent Mezher’s website. Commissioner Bauer asked Respondent Espohl: “Do you understand that advertising for a free consultation can pose problems if within the middle of that consultation a trigger is created that automatically results in some sort of a potential fee-generating event?” Respondent conceded: “Theoretically I can see that point.”
(Hr’g Tr. p. 188)

Respondent Espohl's Communication With Clients Is Under His Control

Respondent Espohl argues that because Respondent Mezher's website is not under his control, he is not responsible for any inherently misleading content it may convey. Yet as the sisters' attorney, he was responsible for communicating any additional fees or charges to them, and ensuring that they were not misled by their consultation with him. The sisters had no way of knowing when billing would commence, and Respondent Espohl failed to make it clear at any point during the uninterrupted February 3 consultation that it would.

CONCLUSION

The Board's findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation regarding Respondent Mezher and Respondent Espohl's violation of Rules 7.1 and 1.5(b), respectively, should be upheld.

Respondent Mezher, by clear and convincing evidence, violated Rule 7.1. She advertised a free consultation on her website, yet a few weeks after her employees conducted a free consultation with Ms. Burns and Ms. Mahaffey, her firm presented Ms. Burns with a \$250.00 bill for "Atty – Conference." As it is a violation to make a misleading communication about a lawyer's services, the Board's recommendation for a public reprimand with costs should be upheld.

Likewise, Respondent Espohl violated Rule 1.5(b) by failing to communicate to Ms. Burns and Ms. Mahaffey the nature and scope of his representation and the basis or rate of the fee and expenses for which the sisters were responsible. Therefore, the Board's recommendation that he be publicly reprimanded with costs should be upheld.

Respectfully submitted:

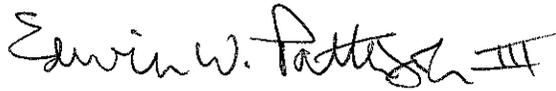


James F. Brockman (#0009469)
312 Walnut St.
Ste. 3100
Cincinnati, OH 45202
513-421-6630
jbrockman@lindhorstlaw.com

Katherine C. Morgan (#0068184)
1 Neumann Way
MDJ104
Cincinnati, OH 45215
513-243-3740
Katherine.morgan@ge.com

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that a true and correct copy of the foregoing Relator's Answer Brief was mailed by United States mail, first class postage prepaid, this 13th day of July, 2012 to Thomas W. Condit, Counsel for Respondent Mezher, P.O. Box 12700, Cincinnati, OH 45212 and to Frank E. Espohl, Respondent *pro se*, 8075 Beechmont Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45202.



Edwin W. Patterson(#0019701)

General Counsel

Cincinnati Bar Association

The Cincinnati Bar Center

225 East Sixth St., 2nd Floor

Cincinnati, OH 45202

(513) 699-1403

(513) 381-0528 (Fax)