MEDICINE

THE WORK NOTE

CASELET

The fluorescent lights of the Urgent Care hummed with a low, electric buzz that Dr. Elias Thorne had stopped noticing years ago. Sarah sat anxiously on the edge of the exam table, her left wrist wrapped in a beige ace bandage. She looked far older than the thirty-two years listed on her chart. She was still wearing her work uniform, a dark blue polo with the company's logo, and her eyes showed an accumulated fatigue.

Dr. Thorne reviewed the X-ray on the tablet. "Good news, Sarah. It's definitely not broken. Just a Grade 1 sprain. Uncomfortable, but structurally, everything is intact."

Sarah didn't look relieved. She looked defeated. She stared at her good hand, picking at a loose thread on her pants. "Okay," she whispered. "That's…good."

"We'll get you a brace," Dr. Thorne continued, his voice practicing the standard discharge speech he gave ten times a day. "Ice, elevation, ibuprofen. You should be able to go back to work with light duty in two days, maybe three."

Sarah looked up sharply, panic flashing in her eyes. "Two days? Dr. Thorne, I… I can't go back in two days. I work the warehouse floor. They don't really do 'light duty' for people like me. If I'm there, I'm lifting."

Dr. Thorne paused. He knew that in many cases, employers could be pretty hard on employees. "I'll write a note specifying strict lifting restrictions. They have to honor that legally."

"They'll just cut my hours to zero until I'm fully healed," Sarah said, her voice trembling. "I can't lose my paycheck…And I can't…I just can't right now. My youngest has had the flu for a week, my mom is in the hospital across town, and I haven't slept more than four hours a night since last month. If I have to go back on Tuesday, I think I'm going to snap." Sarah looked Dr. Thorne in the eye, on the verge of tears. "Please. Can you just write me out for two weeks? Just until the swelling is totally gone?"

Dr. Thorne looked down at the tablet. Medical guidelines for a Grade 1 sprain were clear: return to work as tolerated, usually within 24-48 hours. To write a note declaring her medically incapacitated for fourteen days was, by the strict definition of his training, a lie. Her wrist did not

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require two weeks to heal before she could return to work, especially light duty. But her overall health? She was clearly struggling.

In most cases, he stuck to the guidelines. Patients often made requests for later return-to-work dates. He couldn't blame them, especially those in grueling jobs, but his role was to provide accurate medical information. He looked back at Sarah—her shaking hands, the overwhelming burden of being the sole provider for family, and employers who often saw employees as replaceable.

“Two weeks,” Dr. Thorne said slowly, nearly to himself.

“Please,” she whispered. “I just need to catch my breath.”

Dr. Thorne turned to the counter and pulled the 'Return to Work' pad toward him and wrote “14 days” which he knew no-one would question and that Sarah’s employer would legally have to comply. He signed his name at the bottom, the ink dark and permanent. He handed the slip to Sarah, who took it as if it were a lifeline.

“Thank you,” she breathed, her shoulders dropping three inches as the tension left her body. “You have no idea.”

Later that day, back in the quiet of his office, Dr. Thorne took another look at an X-ray of a perfectly healthy bone and wondered if he had done the right thing.

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