

20-0001ISSUE

1. May a lawyer testify as an expert witness in a matter adverse to a former client?
2. May a lawyer that has served as a testifying expert subsequently take on a new client adverse to the party on whose behalf the lawyer previously offered expert testimony?
3. May a lawyer serve as an expert witness against a current client of the lawyer's law firm in an unrelated matter?

DIGESTAUTHORITIES INTERPRETED

1. California Rules of Professional Conduct 1.7, 1.9, 1.10.
2. *American Airlines, Inc. v. Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton*, (2002) 96 Cal.App.4th 1017
3. *Commonwealth Ins. Co. v. Stone Container Corp.* (N.D.Ill. 2001) 178 F.Supp.2d 938
4. *Oasis West Realty, LLC v. Goldman* (2011) 51 Cal.4th 811
5. COPRAC Opinions 1995-141; 1999-154
6. ABA Opinion 97-407

STATEMENT OF FACTSScenario 1

Law Firm represents Company in negotiating a long-term commercial lease. During the course of that representation, Law Firm learns confidential information about Company's business model and structure. Once the long-term lease is executed, Law Firm sends Company a letter notifying Company that the attorney-client relationship has concluded.

Years later, Company sues a competitor alleging claims of misappropriation of trade secrets. Expert, a lawyer at Law Firm, is retained by Company's opposing party in that lawsuit to testify regarding business valuation and damages against Company.

Scenario 2

Expert, a lawyer, serves as a testifying expert witness regarding the standard of care for lawyers in like or similar circumstances on behalf of Plaintiff, a plaintiff in a legal malpractice litigation matter. Expert is engaged by the lawyers for Plaintiff. In Expert's engagement agreement with the retaining law firm, Expert explicitly discloses that Expert's role is limited to providing

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opinion testimony and that Expert will not be providing any legal advice to either Plaintiff or the lawyers representing Plaintiff in the legal malpractice litigation.

During Expert's service as a testifying expert witness on behalf of Plaintiff, Expert learned certain non-public information about Plaintiff. Later, Expert's firm, Law Firm, is retained by the other party in the legal malpractice litigation, Defendant, in a separate but substantially related matter.

### Scenario 3

Expert, a lawyer at Law Firm, is asked to testify as a testifying expert witness against Company, a current client of Law Firm. The matter upon which Expert will testify is entirely unrelated to the matter in which Law Firm represents Company and the party on whose behalf Expert will testify is not a party to any action in which Law Firm represents Company. Moreover, Expert has never performed any work on any matter on behalf of Company nor has Expert obtained any confidential information about Company.

### Scenario 4

Law Firm represents Company in litigation. Expert, a lawyer at Law Firm, is asked to testify as an expert witness on behalf of the party opposing Company in that litigation, in an entirely unrelated matter that is not in any way adverse to Company. Expert has never performed any work on any matter on behalf of Company nor has Expert obtained any confidential information about Company.

## DISCUSSION

### **A. Application of the Rules of Professional Conduct to a Testifying Expert**

This Committee's prior opinions have defined non-legal services as "services that are not performed as part of the practice of law and which may be performed by non-lawyers without constituting the practice of law." Cal Formal Opn. No. 1995-141. It is well-settled that a lawyer or law firm has the right to provide non-legal services. *Id.* (citing Charles W. Wolfram, *Modern Legal Ethics* (1986) pp. 897-898). While the committee does not opine on the practice of law, this Opinion assumes that a lawyer serving only as a testifying expert witness is not engaged in the practice of law. This is because, notwithstanding the fact that a testifying expert may be a lawyer, a testifying expert's function is solely limited to providing testimony helpful for a finder of fact. Indeed, the law itself is not normally a proper subject of expert testimony. *See Kasem v. Dion-Kindem* (2014) 230 Cal. App. 4<sup>th</sup> 1395, 1400. Moreover, it would not make sense to determine that a lawyer testifying as an expert was engaged in the practice of law, whereas a doctor, accountant, accident reconstructionist, or any other number of expert witnesses were not, despite the fact that all experts were engaged in the same general function.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, there is nothing per se barring an inactive lawyer from providing expert testimony which would otherwise be provided by a lawyer, provided that the inactive lawyer had the requisite experience to qualify as an expert on

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Conversely, a lawyer who acts as a consulting expert, without any expectation or even possibility that the lawyer will testify, is often engaged in the practice of law, and for purposes of this Opinion is assumed to be doing so. Accordingly, since a consulting lawyer expert who serves more in the role of co-counsel than as a witness is practicing law, that lawyer is bound by all ethical obligations of a lawyer, including those found in the Rules of Professional Conduct, the Business and Professions Code, and as set forth in case law.

The ABA Committee's non-unanimous opinion reflects the fact that it is an open, or at the very least close, question as to whether testifying as an expert to assist the trier of fact so closely resembles the practice of law that it falls in the "law related" category thus potentially subjecting the lawyer expert witness to the Rules of Professional Conduct. California law recognizes that the client's reasonable expectations as to whether there is an attorney-client relationship are a function of the circumstances, including the pattern of custom and practice or attorney's prior relationship with the client and the lawyer's statements and conduct. *See Kane & Kritzer, Inc. v. Altagen* (1980) 107 Cal.App.3d 36, 40-42; Cal. State Bar Form.Opn. 2003-161, at 3;<sup>2</sup> *Fox v. Pollack* (1986) 181 Cal.App.3d 954, 959. A lawyer providing non-legal services has a duty to clarify whether and to what extent a lawyer-client relationship exists, at least when a lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the consumer believes that such a relationship exists. Formal Opinion 1995-141; *compare Butler v. State Bar*, 42 Cal. 3d 323, 329 (1986); *cf.* Rule 1.13 (f); Rule 4.3 (a).

However, it is also settled that a lawyer can avoid the formation of an implied lawyer-client relationship through words or actions making it unreasonable for the putative client to infer that such a relationship exists, and that the sophistication of the client is relevant in assessing the reasonableness of the client's belief. *Sky Valley Ltd. Partnership v. ATX Sky Valley, Ltd.*, 150 F.R.D. 648, 651-52 (N.D. Cal. 1993) (applying California law); *see also People v. Gionis*, 9 Cal. 4th 1196 (1995); Formal Opinion 2003-161 n.1. Thus, while the ABA Opinion 97-407 ultimately concluded that serving as a testifying expert was not a law-related service, this Committee believes that the question is more nuanced under California law, and turns on specific facts of each individual circumstance.

Consistent with that case law, we have previously opined that a lawyer offering a law-related service and not engaged in the practice of law, who clearly informs the consumer in writing that the lawyer is not providing legal services or legal advice, is not subject to the entire Rules of

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the subject. While this Committee does not comment on the unauthorized practice of law, it would be fair to say that providing such testimony – for instance on the standard of care of lawyers in like or similar circumstances – would not be the practice of law.

<sup>2</sup> "Factors to be considered in making a determination that such a relationship was formed include: whether the attorney volunteered his services to the speaker; whether the attorney agreed to investigate a matter and provide legal advice to the speaker about the matter's possible merits; whether the attorney previously represented the speaker; whether the speaker sought legal advice and the attorney provided that advice; whether the setting is confidential; and whether the speaker paid fees or other consideration to the attorney. Cal. State Bar Form. Opn. 2003-161, at 1.

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Professional Conduct. Formal Opinion 1999-154. Applying these principles then, and assuming that the lawyer in question is providing only expert witness testimony in a matter as opposed to practicing law, we believe that a lawyer who explicitly disclaims a lawyer client relationship and states the lawyer will not be practicing law, in an engagement agreement or other disclosure, has sufficiently satisfied the requirement such that it would be unreasonable for a consumer of those expert services to believe the lawyer was practicing law or that an attorney-client relationship had formed. As such, in the instance where an attorney-client relationship is specifically disclaimed and no legal advice or services are provided, the entirety of the Rules of Professional Conduct do not apply vis a vis the party retaining the lawyer testifying expert, either on his or her own or through counsel.

Of course, a lawyer is always subject to discipline, whether or not engaged in the practice of law, for conduct that violates provisions like Business and Professions Code Section 6106 or Rule 8.4.<sup>3</sup> There are also a number of Rules which are applicable regardless of whether or not a lawyer is engaged in the practice of law.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this Opinion is on the application of

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<sup>3</sup> Business and Professions Code section 6106 states:

The commission of any act involving moral turpitude, dishonesty or corruption, whether the act is committed in the course of his relations as an attorney or otherwise, and whether the act is a felony or misdemeanor or not, constitutes a cause for disbarment or suspension.

If the act constitutes a felony or misdemeanor, conviction thereof in a criminal proceeding is not a condition precedent to disbarment or suspension from practice therefor.

Rule 8.4 states:

It is professional misconduct for a lawyer to:

- (a) violate these rules or the State Bar Act, knowingly\* assist, solicit, or induce another to do so, or do so through the acts of another;
- (b) commit a criminal act that reflects adversely on the lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as a lawyer in other respects;
- (c) engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud,\* deceit, or reckless or intentional misrepresentation;
- (d) engage in conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice;
- (e) state or imply an ability to influence improperly a government agency or official, or to achieve results by means that violate these rules, the State Bar Act, or other law; or
- (f) knowingly\* assist, solicit, or induce a judge or judicial officer in conduct that is a violation of an applicable code of judicial ethics or code of judicial conduct, or other law. For purposes of this rule, "judge" and "judicial officer" have the same meaning as in rule 3.5(c).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. Rule 2.4 (lawyer acting as third party neutral); Rule 2.4.1 (lawyer acting as temporary judge); Rule 3.3 (candor to the court not limited to instances where lawyer is representing a client or otherwise practicing law). Rule 3.7 specifically applies to lawyers acting as a witness. However, the provisions of Rule 3.7, on their face, only place additional requirements on lawyer acting as an advocate in a trial in which the lawyer is likely to be a witness. (Rule 3.7(a).) A testifying expert witness, as set forth above, is not an advocate. Moreover, Rule 3.7(b) allows one lawyer within a firm to act as a witness while another member of a firm is the advocate. Thus, for purposes of this Opinion, Rule 3.7 is inapplicable to lawyer's acting as a testifying expert witness.

conflict rules, Rule 1.7, 1.9, and imputation under Rule 1.10, to lawyers acting as testifying experts.

#### Application to Each Scenario

##### Scenario 1(Lawyer then Expert):

Here, Law Firm formerly represented Company in litigation. Thus, Company is a former client, meaning Rule 1.9 is potentially applicable. As a preliminary matter, the Committee does not believe that subsection (a) or (b) of Rule 1.9 is applicable, as those subdivisions provide for limitations on subsequent “representations” of new clients which are adverse to the former client. As set forth above, the Committee has assumed for purposes of this Opinion that Expert’s new work as a testifying expert is not the practice of law nor is it a “law related service.” As such, there is no subsequent representation to trigger Rule 1.9(a) or (b). However, in the earlier litigation, Law Firm learned confidential information related to its former client Company’s business. Thus, Rule 1.9(c) is potentially applicable.

Under Rule 1.9(c), a lawyer who has formerly represented a client in a matter may not use information acquired by virtue of the representation which is protected by Business and Professions Code section 6068(e) or Rule 1.6 to the disadvantage of the former client other than when the Rules otherwise permit or if the information has become generally known, nor may such information be disclosed other than when permitted by the Rules. As Comment [1] to Rule 1.9 explains, a lawyer owes the duty to a former client, even after termination, not to “(i) do anything that will injuriously affect the former client in any matter in which the lawyer represented the former client, or (ii) at any time use against the former client knowledge or information acquired by virtue of the previous relationship.” In *Oasis West Realty, LLC v. Goldman* (2011) 51 Cal.4th 811, 823, cited in Comment [1], the California Supreme Court stated: “It is not difficult to discern that use of confidential information against a former client can be damaging to the client, even if the attorney is not working on behalf of a new client and even if none of the information is actually disclosed.”

This hypothetical is silent as to whether Expert personally acquired such information, and the Committee does not believe it makes a difference to Expert’s ethical duties. Rule 1.10(a) provides that, except in circumstances not relevant to this analysis, “[w]hile lawyers are associated in a firm, none of them shall knowingly represent a client when any one of them practicing alone would be prohibited from doing so by rules 1.7 or 1.9.” We believe that this Rule acts to impute upon Expert the confidential information Law Firm obtained from Company. Expert is prohibited from using that confidential information acquired by Law Firm to Company’s disadvantage or revealing that information. See Rule 1.9(c) and Comment [1]; *Oasis West Realty, LLC v. Goldman* (2011) 51 Cal.4th 811, 823; *Wutchumna Water Co. v. Bailey* (1932) 216 Cal. 564, 573–574. However, if Expert does not use confidential information to Company’s

disadvantage, and does not reveal said information, then the subsequent retention as a fact expert is ethically permissible, even if it is on a substantially related subject.<sup>5</sup>

Scenario 2 (Expert then Lawyer):

In this scenario, Expert performs testifying services first. As set forth in the discussion above, Expert has neither formed an attorney-client relationship with Plaintiff, nor is Expert engaged in a law related service, particularly given the disclaimer Expert provided in Expert's retention agreement. As such, Plaintiff is not a "former client" within the meaning of Rule 1.9, and so the limitations on subsequent adverse representations are not present. However, Expert may still owe duties to Plaintiff, as defined by agency and contract law. One of those, particularly prior to being designated as a trial witness, is the duty to keep client confidences, as Expert would be a necessary third party and bound by the attorney-client privilege and confidentiality as an agent of Plaintiff's lawyers. *See Evid. C. § 952, Law Rev. Comm'n Comment; City & County of San Francisco v. Sup.Ct.* (1951) 37 Cal.2d 227, 234-23 (communication to physician engaged by attorney to examine client necessary to "interpret" client's condition to attorney).

Thus, subject to Expert's contractual and common law duty to keep the information privileged as an agent, Law Firm may be permitted to represent Defendant in the related litigation.<sup>6</sup> However, given Expert's duties under agency law, Defendant's informed written consent under Rule 1.7 may be required of Law Firm if, under Rule 1.7(b), Expert's ability to represent Defendant is materially limited by Expert's responsibilities to or relationship with a third party – Plaintiff because that material limitation is imputed to Law Firm under Rule 1.10(a). A key word in Rule 1.7(b) is "informed." It is not hard to imagine a situation where Expert's duty of confidentiality to Plaintiff prevents Expert from giving Defendant the information necessary to determine whether to sign a waiver. If that is the case, then Expert, and Law Firm, may be effectively barred from representing Defendant.

Of course, once Expert is designated and testifies, the privilege would be lost. *See Shooker v. Sup.Ct. (Winnick)* (2003) 111 Cal.App.4th 923, 928-930; *Shadow Traffic Network v. Sup.Ct. (Metro Traffic Control, Inc.)* (1994) 24 Cal.App.4th 1067, 1079, 1080; *DeLuca v. State Fish Co., Inc.* (2013) 217 Cal.App.4th 671, 691-692. As such, there is no ongoing duty of confidentiality

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<sup>5</sup> Whether Expert will be disqualified from testifying is dependent upon a number of factors, including whether there is a substantial relationship between the first representation and the expert assignment and Expert's involvement in the former representation, or lack thereof. *See Brand v. 20th Century Ins. Co./21st Century Ins. Co.* (2004) 124 Cal.App.4th 594, 602-605. This Opinion addresses only Expert's ethical duties as an attorney, and not the substantive law regarding disqualification of an expert witness.

<sup>6</sup> This Opinion assumes that expert provides only testimony. To the extent that expert crosses the line and begins to act as a consultant or otherwise provide legal advice, it is possible that expert will be engaging in the practice of law. If that were to happen, then Plaintiff would be a former client under Rule 1.9. Because the matters are substantially related, Expert, and Law Firm under Rule 1.10(a), would need informed written consent from Plaintiff if the new client's interests were materially adverse to Plaintiff's.

owed. Expert and Law Firm are permitted to represent Defendant in the separate but substantially related matter.

Scenario 3 (Concurrent Expert and Lawyer, part 1)

The final scenario involves concurrent matters, with Expert testifying on behalf of one party while Law Firm represents the other in unrelated litigation. Most state ethics opinions to have addressed the question of lawyers testifying as an expert, and the ABA opinion on the topic, say that Model Rule 1.7 or the State’s counterpart, do not generally apply with regard to expert testimony because an expert is not practicing law. *See* ABA Opn 97-407; *Commonwealth Ins. Co. v. Stone Container Corp.* (N.D.Ill. 2001) 178 F.Supp.2d 938.

The leading case nationally is *Commonwealth Ins. Co. v. Stone Container Corp.*, 178 F. Supp. 2d 938, 943-945 (N.D. Ill. 2001). *Commonwealth* involved the question of whether a lawyer expert could testify against a current client of the firm in an insurance coverage dispute, when the firm’s representation of the client in a Chinese joint venture project was substantively unrelated and conducted by lawyers located in a firm office in another city. The court, applying Illinois law, held that the Rules of Professional Conduct did not apply to the lawyer’s work as an expert witness because there was no lawyer-client relationship, and that under the “spirit” of the Rules disqualification was not required by the firm’s duty of loyalty to the current client because the two assignments were both substantively and organizationally so far afield from each other. The court made clear that it might have reached a different result if it had concluded that the representation of the client had given the firm substantial confidential information that might have been used by the expert to the client’s detriment.

California has not directly addressed this issue by ethics opinion, in the Rules, or in case law. However, a similar factual scenario was addressed in the California case of *American Airlines, Inc. v. Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton*, (2002) 96 Cal.App.4th In *American Airlines*, a lawyer who previously represented American Airlines later served as a 30b6 (PMK) witness against American Airline’s request for a different party that was arguably adverse to American Airlines. The Court disqualified the expert and found that he had breached fiduciary duties to American Airlines, stating:

Application of Rule 3-310(C) does not require representation of both clients *as an attorney*. The discussion section which follows Rule 3-310 states: “Subparagraphs (C)(1) and (C)(2) are intended to apply to all types of legal employment, including the concurrent representation of multiple parties in litigation or in a single transaction or in some other common enterprise or legal relationship.”

In support of that conclusion, the *American Airlines* Court cited language in the Discussion to former Rule 3-310(C) stating that it applied to “all types of legal employment.” It also relied upon case law decided under former Rule 5-102 (B), which said that a lawyer could not

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“represent conflicting interests.” The court also relied upon the *fiduciary agency* relationship a person most qualified witness has with the company.

This Committee does not believe either *Commonwealth* or *American Airlines* are directly on point. *Commonwealth* interpreted Illinois Rule 1.7, which is closely aligned with the Model Rules, whereas California requires disclosures in substantially more instances. *Commonwealth* also analyzed the issue entirely under the guise of a disqualification motion, a motion which requires far more than simply an ethical breach. Likewise, *American Airlines* is distinguishable given the fact that the opinion was based upon fiduciary duties owed by a 30(b)(6) witness, whereas an expert witness is fundamentally different than a person most qualified given the specific lack of any fiduciary duty. Moreover, like in *Commonwealth*, *American Airlines* based its analysis upon language that is no longer contained in the California Rules of Professional Conduct. Based upon these significant differences, this Committee does not believe that Rule 1.7 applies to Expert’s work as a testifying Expert against Company.

Law Firm is obviously bound by Rule 1.7(b) vis a vis its current client, Company. Rule 1.7(b) requires informed written consent when there is “a significant risk the lawyer’s representation of the client will be materially limited by the lawyer’s responsibilities to or relationships with ... a third person.” A conflict under Rule 1.7(b) is imputed to other members of Law Firm pursuant to Rule 1.10(a). Moreover, under Rule 1.7(c), even when there is not a significant risk requiring a lawyer to comply with 1.7(b), informed written consent is still required when “the lawyer ... knows that another lawyer in the lawyer’s firm has a legal, business, financial, professional, or personal relationship with or responsibility to a party or witness in the same matter.” Rule 1.7(c)(1).

We do not believe, on the facts given, that informed written consent is required under Rule 1.7(b). Under Rule 1.7(b), the crucial question is whether there is a “significant risk” that Law Firm’s representation of Company will be materially limited by Expert’s services on behalf of a party adverse to Company. As discussed in previous sections, Rule 1.10(a) acts to impute a conflict under Rule 1.7 to an entire firm when any lawyer within the firm has a conflict. Thus, an analysis of whether Expert has a conflict under Rule 1.7 is appropriate. However, since Expert owes no fiduciary duties to the party opposing company, it is not clear that Expert’s work would pose any material limitations to the representation of Company. For example, even if Expert were to learn confidential information which would benefit Company, and which Expert is barred from disclosing due to confidentiality, Company will be in no worse (or better) position than had Expert never learned such information. Without a material limitation, there is no disclosure or informed written consent requirement under Rule 1.7(b). Of course, whether such a significant risk of a material limitation is present is a fact-based inquiry and depends upon specific facts of each situation.

Likewise, we do not believe disclosure is required under Rule 1.7(c)(1). This is because Rule 1.7(c)(1) is limited to situations in which a lawyer has a “legal, business, financial, professional, or personal relationship with or responsibility to a party or witness *in the same matter*.”

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255 (emphasis added). Here, the facts are clear that the party on whose behalf Expert has been  
256 asked to testify is not a party to the litigation in which Law Firm represents Company. Thus, by  
257 its plan terms, Rule 1.7(c)(1) does not apply.

### 258 Scenario 4 (Concurrent Expert and Lawyer, part 2)

259 Unlike in scenario 3, Expert has been asked to testify on behalf of Company's adverse party in  
260 litigation in which Expert's firm, Law Firm, represents Company. However, the proposed  
261 testimony is in litigation entirely unrelated to that in which Law Firm represents Company. Also  
262 unlike in scenario 3, the proposed testimony is not in any way adverse to Company.

263 Despite the fact that the testimony is not adverse, because Expert is being asked to testify on  
264 behalf of the opposing party in litigation in which Law Firm is representing Company,  
265 Company's informed written consent is required. This is because Rule 1.7(c)(1), discussed  
266 above, is applicable since Expert, a member of Law Firm, will have a business or professional  
267 relationship with a party in the same matter in which Law Firm is representing Company.

### 268 CONCLUSION

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