

Physicians' Political Communications with Patients and their Families

Physicians enjoy the rights and privileges of free political speech shared by all Americans. Those who choose to may be political activists, editorialists, community leaders, politicians, and office-holders. In addition to these ordinary rights of participation, physicians have a particular and enhanced duty to work for the reform of, and to press for the proper administration of, laws that affect access to health care, quality of health care services, and the public health. It is natural that in fulfilling these political responsibilities, physicians will express their views to patients or their families, and will attempt to solicit the support of patients or their families for particular positions, parties, or candidates. Such conversations and attempts are a fundamental part of political freedom, and, in cases bearing on health-related issues, of professional responsibility. They must, however, be undertaken with great care in order that they do not interfere with the patient-physician relationship, exploit the medical authority of the physician, or impose upon vulnerable patients and family members. This report lays out some basic considerations and guidelines for the ethical conduct of the important political discussions by which physicians fulfill their professional responsibilities and exercise their rights as American citizens.

PHYSICIANS AS CITIZENS

General Rights

American physicians have a long and noble tradition of active participation in politics. Since—and including—the drafting of the Constitution of the United States, physicians have served in every phase of public life, holding office, supporting parties, conducting campaigns, and pressing for needed reforms. Physicians may run for political office, lobby for political positions, parties or candidates, and in every other way exercise the full scope of their political rights as citizens, provided that this exercise does not interfere with or exploit the special and centrally important relationship they have with their patients and their families.

Special Responsibilities

In addition to these general rights, physicians have certain special political responsibilities. Principle VII of the Principles of Medical Ethics requires that physicians “recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to an improved community.” Additionally, Principle III requires that physicians “recognize a responsibility to seek changes in those requirements [of the law] which are contrary to the best interests of the patient.” Fulfillment of these responsibilities requires that physicians keep themselves well-informed about current political questions regarding needed and proposed changes to laws governing access to health care, quality of health care services, scope of medical research, and promotion of public health, and that they offer their candid views on these subjects whenever those views are solicited.

Patients, the public, and political leaders often turn to physicians for expert advice about health-related matters. Physicians owe them well-informed opinions. Physicians who can offer views that are based both on their own experience and on a thoughtful study of current events can do a great service to the public and the profession alike.

The Role of Organized Medicine

Physicians' duties to propose needed changes in the law and its administration may sometimes be fulfilled through activity within organized medicine rather than through direct contact with individual patients. Professional organizations often have the skills and resources to effect important changes in policy; in some cases, they may do so more effectively than can physicians acting individually.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES WITH PATIENTS

Physicians should never allow their personal disagreement or agreement with patients or their families about political matters to interfere with the quality of care they provide for patients. This is a fundamental rule of medical ethics that transcends particular political situations and periods. Physicians' care for patients is their central mission; it should in no way be affected by their patients' decisions to support or not to support particular political positions, parties, or candidates.

PERSONAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS WITH PATIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

While physicians have the right and responsibility to communicate with their patients and their families about political matters, such communication must be undertaken with sensitivity to the threats that such communication can pose to the patient-physician relationship. Conversations about political matters are not appropriate at times when patients or families are emotionally pressured by significant medical circumstances. Physicians are best able to judge both the intrusiveness of the discussion and the patient's level of comfort. In general, when conversation with the patient or family concerning social, civic, or recreational matters is acceptable, discussion of items of political import may be appropriate.

It often happens, for example, that after a routine visit, conversation in the office setting will take a palpable turn away from the patient's immediate medical concerns. At such moments, particularly when physicians have antecedent friendly relations with the patient or family in question, it may be appropriate for physicians to turn discussion toward political concerns. But physicians should enter into such conversations only with the utmost caution and sensitivity to the feelings of patients and their families. Finally, physicians should cease political conversations whenever it becomes apparent that the patient or family is even slightly uncomfortable with such conversations, or finds them invasive. Communications by telephone or other modalities should be conducted with similar sensitivity to the vulnerabilities and sensitivities of patients and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs recommends that the following statements be adopted and that the remainder of this report be filed.

- 1) It is laudable for physicians to run for political office, to lobby for political positions, parties or candidates, and in every other way to exercise the full scope of their political rights as citizens. These rights may be exercised individually or through involvement with organizations such as professional societies and political action committees.

- 2) Physicians have a responsibility to keep themselves well-informed as to current political questions regarding needed and proposed changes to laws concerning access to health care, quality of health care services, scope of medical research, and promotion of public health.
- 3) Communications by telephone or other modalities with patients and their families about political matters must be conducted with the utmost sensitivity to patients' vulnerability and desire for privacy. Conversations about political matters are not appropriate at times when patients or families are emotionally pressured by significant medical circumstances. Physicians are best able to judge both the intrusiveness of the discussion and the patient's level of comfort. In general, when conversation with the patient or family concerning social, civic, or recreational matters is acceptable, discussion of items of political import may be appropriate.
- 4) Physicians should not allow their differences with patients or their families about political matters to interfere with their delivery of professional care of high quality.