

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL ON ETHICAL AND JUDICIAL AFFAIRS

CEJA Report 5-I-01

Subject: A Declaration of Professional Responsibility

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Presented to: Reference Committee on Amendments to Constitution and Bylaws
(Robert T. Gibbons, MD, Chair)

1 Medicine’s response to threats to human health

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3 Bioterrorism, the AIDS pandemic, and the potential misuse of genetic science pose
4 unprecedented threats to the health and well being of humanity. While these threats are new,
5 medicine’s response to these challenges is guided by a centuries-old ethic of caring for the sick
6 and the suffering.

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8 In light of these new threats, the AMA is positioned to lead the world community of physicians in
9 joining together across geographical and political divides in a public recommitment to medicine’s
10 guiding principles. The *Declaration of Professional Responsibility: Medicine’s Social Contract*
11 *with Humanity* (see Appendix) is an instrument for demonstrating that unity. The *Declaration*
12 affirms (1) the ideals that, throughout history, have motivated individuals to enter the profession
13 of medicine, and (2) the conduct that has given life to those ideals and earned society’s trust in
14 the healing profession.

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16 Declaration of Professional Responsibility

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18 The *Declaration of Professional Responsibility* is a public reaffirmation of physicians’ dedication
19 to the ideals and obligations of the profession. These ideals and obligations transcend physician
20 roles and specialties, professional associations, geographic boundaries, and political differences,
21 uniting all physicians in a community of service to humankind.

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23 The *Declaration* is enforced solely by the honor of its signatories and their respect for the
24 profession. In this regard, it differs from codes of ethics used in the adjudication of legal and
25 ethical issues by professional boards and courts of law. The *Declaration* is a powerful symbolic
26 statement calling all physicians to uphold and celebrate medicine’s historical covenant with
27 society.

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29 Because of its context and symbolic nature, the *Declaration* employs language appropriate to the
30 historical moment in which it arises, and it adopts a tone intended to inspire reflection and
31 rededication. Its language frames medicine’s ideals and physicians’ duties in terms to which all
32 those who respect the profession’s obligations to care for its sick and suffering can subscribe.
33 Greater specificity would compromise the universal applicability of the *Declaration* and possibly
34 divide rather than unite physicians. All physicians, for example, can pledge to “respect human
35 life and the dignity of every individual”(#1). More specific language might engender division
36 and argument over definitions of personhood. Similarly, the duty to refrain from supporting or
37 committing crimes against humanity (#2) enjoins physicians from engaging in biochemical
38 warfare research and a host of other acts that would result in human suffering, and the duty to

1 treat the sick and injured with competence and compassion and without prejudice (#3) prohibits
2 racial, ethnic, and other forms of bias.

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4 The *Declaration's* nine duties and obligations speak to physicians in their roles as clinicians (#3-
5 #5), researchers (#6), educators (#7, #9), and members of a civil society (#1, #2, #8). The
6 *Declaration of Professional Responsibility* asks physicians to use their skills beyond the bounds
7 of the traditional patient-physician relationship in responding to exceptional global conditions and
8 need for care. Thus, the Preamble to the *Declaration* concludes by stating, on behalf of the
9 community of physicians, that “humanity is our patient.” This is more than rhetoric, for in
10 disasters and epidemics, few of the afflicted are able to become “patients” in the traditional sense,
11 yet many need care.

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13 Recommendation

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15 The Council recommends that the following be adopted and the remainder of the report be filed:

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17 That our AMA adopt the Declaration of Professional Responsibility and disseminate it to all
18 medical societies within and beyond the Federation and to national medical societies around the
19 world for their support.

APPENDIX

**DECLARATION OF PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY:
MEDICINE’S SOCIAL CONTRACT WITH HUMANITY**

Preamble

Never in the history of human civilization has the well being of each individual been so inextricably linked to that of every other. Plagues and pandemics respect no national borders in a world of global commerce and travel. Wars and acts of terrorism enlist innocents as combatants and mark civilians as targets. Advances in medical science and genetics, while promising to do great good, may also be harnessed as agents of evil. The unprecedented scope and immediacy of these universal challenges demand concerted action and response by all.

As physicians, we are bound in our response by a common heritage of caring for the sick and the suffering. Through the centuries, individual physicians have fulfilled this obligation by applying their skills and knowledge competently, selflessly and at times heroically. Today, our profession must reaffirm its historical commitment to combat natural and man-made assaults on the health and well being of humankind. Only by acting together across geographic and ideological divides can we overcome such powerful threats. Humanity is our patient.

Declaration

We, the members of the world community of physicians, solemnly commit ourselves to:

1. Respect human life and the dignity of every individual.
2. Refrain from supporting or committing crimes against humanity and condemn any such acts.
3. Treat the sick and injured with competence and compassion and without prejudice.
4. Apply our knowledge and skills when needed, though doing so may put us at risk.
5. Protect the privacy and confidentiality of those for whom we care and breach that confidence only when keeping it would seriously threaten their health and safety or that of others.
6. Work freely with colleagues to discover, develop, and promote advances in medicine and public health that ameliorate suffering and contribute to human well-being.
7. Educate the public and polity about present and future threats to the health of humanity.
8. Advocate for social, economic, educational, and political changes that ameliorate suffering and contribute to human well-being.
9. Teach and mentor those who follow us for they are the future of our caring profession.

We make these promises solemnly, freely, and upon our personal and professional honor.