

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL ON ETHICAL AND JUDICIAL AFFAIRS*

CEJA Report 8 - A-03

Subject: Disrespect and Derogatory Conduct in the Patient-Physician Relationship

Presented by: Leonard J. Morse, MD, Chair

Referred to: Reference Committee on Amendments to Constitution and Bylaws
(Donna A. Woodson, MD, Chair)

1 At the 2001 Interim Meeting, Resolution 1, “Non-Discrimination in Responding to Terrorism,” was
2 adopted in response to the events of September 11, 2001, which affected healthcare workers and
3 patients across the country. In part, the resolution asked that the AMA declare its opposition to
4 discrimination against patients, physicians, or other health care workers on the basis of religion,
5 culture, nationality, or country of medical education and/or training. The resolution urged the
6 AMA’s support of the idea that the nation’s response to terrorism must not involve such
7 discrimination or acts of violence against any person on the basis of religion, culture, or nationality.
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9 In light of Resolution 1, the Council reviewed Opinion E-9.12 “Patient-Physician Relationship:
10 Respect for Law and Human Rights” and found that it adequately addresses issues of
11 discrimination and the patient-physician relationship. However, media reports and other evidence
12 following September 11, 2001, revealed cases of refused treatment and verbal abuse of patients
13 based on their ethnic background. These cases displayed unbecoming behavior from health care
14 professionals responsible for treating all those in need without prejudice. The Council concluded
15 that guidance related to derogatory conduct would complement current guidelines included in the
16 *Code of Medical Ethics*.
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18 RECOMMENDATIONS

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20 The Council recommends that the following be adopted and the remainder of the report be filed:
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22 The relationship between patients and physicians is based on trust and should serve to
23 promote patients’ well-being while respecting their dignity and rights. Trust can be
24 established and maintained only when there is mutual respect.
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26 Derogatory language or actions on the part of physicians can cause psychological harm to
27 those they target. Also, such language or actions can cause reluctance in members of
28 targeted groups to seek or to trust medical care and thus create an environment that strains
29 relationships among patients, physicians, and the health care team. Therefore, any such
30 conduct is profoundly antithetical to the *Principles of Medical Ethics*.
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* Reports of the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs are assigned to the reference committee on Constitution and Bylaws. They may be adopted, not adopted, or referred. A report may not be amended, except to clarify the meaning of the report and only with the concurrence of the Council.

1 Patients who use derogatory language or otherwise act in a prejudicial manner toward
2 physicians, other health care professionals, or others in the health care setting, seriously
3 undermine the integrity of the patient-physician relationship. Such behavior, if
4 unmodified, may constitute sufficient justification for the physician to arrange for the
5 transfer of care.

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7 (New House/CEJA Policy)