When appearing in media, physicians carry special responsibility

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Kevin B. O'Reilly
News Editor

Taking an active role in the mass media is one way that physicians can use their knowledge and expertise to help improve the nation’s health, but the roles of doctor and media personality sometimes come into conflict. The AMA House of Delegates (HOD) has adopted new ethical guidance for physicians appearing in the media.

“Physicians have well-recognized responsibilities to use their knowledge and skills for the benefit of the community as a whole,” says the AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs (CEJA) report adopted at the 2017 AMA Interim Meeting in Honolulu, and “stepping into the media environment can serve as an extension of this public function.”

Some of the reasons why physicians may appear in the media include speaking on behalf of public health agencies, appearing as expert consultants, commenting on health matters of interest to the public, or acting as journalists covering medicine.

But taking part in the media can “have unintended consequences,” the CEJA report says, “because information in the public sphere can be sensationalized, misrepresented, or patently falsified, which can have potentially serious consequences if the benefits and drawbacks of medical advice are not appropriately conveyed.”

In addition, the report says, “physician recommendations may not always reflect the standard of care.” Among the risks of mass media communication by physicians are that members of the public consuming the information may wrongly perceive themselves as patients of the doctor participating in the media.

The CEJA report says that physicians should:

- Always remember that they are physicians first and foremost, and must uphold the values, norms, and integrity of the medical profession.
Encourage audience members to seek out qualified physicians to address the unique questions and concerns they have about their respective care when providing general medical advice.

Be aware of how their medical training, qualifications, experience, and advice are being used by media forums and how this information is being communicated to the viewing public. Understand that as physicians, they will be taken as authorities when they engage with the media.

Because of that reality, doctors should “ensure the information they provide is accurate, includes the known risks and benefits, commensurate with their medical expertise, and based on valid scientific evidence and insight gained from professional experience,” the CEJA report says.

Accordingly, physicians should restrict their medical advice to their particular areas of expertise and “clearly distinguish the limits of their medical knowledge where appropriate,” the new ethical opinion says.

Physicians also should:

- Refrain from making clinical diagnoses about individuals (e.g., public officials, celebrities, persons in the news) they have not had the opportunity to personally examine.
- Protect patient privacy and confidentiality by refraining from the discussion of identifiable information, unless given specific permission by the patient to do so.
- Fully disclose any conflicts of interest and avoid situations that may lead to potential conflicts.

“Ethical physician conduct in the media offers effective and accessible medical perspectives that lead to a healthier and better-informed society,” said Stephen R. Permut, MD, former chair of the AMA Board of Trustees. “The newly adopted AMA guidance will help physicians in the media fulfill heightened expectations as credible resources and advisors to patients as well as representatives of the medical profession.”

Read more news coverage of the 2017 AMA Interim Meeting.