

Why does the medical profession need a code of ethics?

Since its adoption at the AMA's founding meeting in 1847, the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics* has articulated the values to which physicians commit themselves as members of the medical profession.

The *Code* is rooted in an understanding of the goals of medicine as a profession that dates back to the 5th century B.C. and the Greek physician Hippocrates: to relieve suffering and promote well-being in a relationship of fidelity with the patient.

But the *Code* is not bound to a particular time. Rather, it is a living document. From political conversations with patients to doctors on TV, the *Code* has evolved to keep pace with changes in medicine and society. Consider guidance the *Code* offers about new issues facing physicians, patients and society.

Politics in the Exam Room

As we edge closer to the U.S. midterm elections, you might wonder whether physicians should ever discuss political issues with patients.

Code Opinion 2.3.4, "Political Communications," addresses this topic, saying that physicians should refrain from initiating political conversations during the clinical encounter.

Health Care Spending

As it does so often, the cost of health care is likely to come up again during this political season.

Code Opinion 11.1.2, "Physician Stewardship of Health Care Resources," helps makes sense of physicians' responsibility to be prudent stewards of the shared resources with which society entrusts them.

Physician Use of Social Media

Politicians aren't alone in considering their Twitter account to be their best means of communicating with the public. Many physicians and medical students are making use of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and many other social networking sites or blogging platforms to get their message to colleagues, patients and policymakers.

Code Opinion 2.3.2, "Professionalism in the Use of Social Media," addresses the issue, noting that physicians and trainees have an ethical responsibility to weigh a number of considerations when maintaining a presence online.

Going on TV? Keep This Ethical Guidance in Mind

Physicians who participate in the media—whether it's on a news program, documentary or fictional presentation—can have an outsized impact on public understanding of vital medical topics.

Code Opinion 8.12, "Ethical Physician Conduct in the Media," spells out the responsibilities of doctors who take part in media opportunities, saying that physicians in the media environment should remember they are physicians first and have ethical obligations to patients, the public and the medical profession.