Frequently asked questions on ethics

What is the AMA Code of Medical Ethics?

The AMA's Code of Medical Ethics offers ethical guidance for the medical profession and centers on the physician-patient relationship. It sets ethical guidance to how physicians should interact with patients. The AMA believes all physicians should uphold the ethical standards set forth in the Code.

First developed in 1847, the Code is regularly updated through reports and opinions of the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs (CEJA). CEJA’s role is to analyze and address timely issues confronting physicians and the medical profession.

How do I file a complaint against a physician I believe is behaving unethically or unprofessionally?

The AMA is bound by due process in all matters related to complaints and generally does not have the legal authority or possesses the proper resources to investigate individual cases.

Grievances against a medical professional who you believe is acting unethically or not providing a certain standard of care should be directed to your state medical licensing board.

What is unprofessional conduct?

Legal standards of professional conduct are set by individual state medical licensing boards and may vary from state to state. While there is no single definition of unprofessional conduct, the Federation of State Medical Board defines such conduct as:

- Patient abuse
- Inadequate record keeping
- Failure to meet the standard of care
- Prescribing drugs in excess or without legitimate reason

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Failing to meet continuing medical education requirements
Dishonesty
Conviction of a felony
Delegating the practice to an unlicensed individual

Billing disputes and poor customer service are generally not viewed as unprofessional conduct.

Contact your state medical licensing board to find out what the standards are in your state.

What is the AMA's policy or position on a given subject?

AMA policy can be found in several ways:

- Ethics policies can be found in the Code of Medical Ethics.
- House policies and directives can be found using PolicyFinder.

Is it ethical if my physician refuses to provide me with a copy of my medical records or is charging a fee for copying my records?

The Code states that physicians should make medical records available as requested by the patient and that a reasonable fee may be charged for transferring medical records (see Opinion 3.3.1 "Management of Medical Records"). Individual states may have regulations defining reasonable fee, contact your state medical licensing board to find out what the regulations are in your state.

Is it ethical for my physician to terminate my care?

The Code states that, in general, physicians are free to choose whom to serve (see Principle VI, Principles of Medical Ethics), but physicians have an obligation to support continuity of care for their patients (see Opinion 1.1.5 "Terminating a Patient-Physician Relationship"). Physicians and patients wanting to know more about the appropriate mechanism for terminating a patient-physician relationship should contact their state medical licensing board to find out what the regulations are in their state.
Is it ethical for a physician I have never seen to refuse to see me?

Opinion 1.1.2 “Prospective Patients” defines circumstances in which a physician may ethically decline to accept specific patients before a patient-physician relationship has been established.

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