

Physicians in the media: Responsibilities to the public and the profession

Updated April 17, 2020

Confronted by the widespread threat to health of a new pandemic disease, the public look to the medical profession for information, advice and reassurance. Physicians who engage public concerns through the media have an obligation to uphold the ethical standards of the profession. The *AMA Code of Medical Ethics* provides guidance for physicians in this public role in Opinion 8.12, "Ethical physician conduct in the media."

In the first instance, physicians must recognize the differences between their roles as medical professionals and the roles of journalist, commentator or media personality. They should be aware that their conduct can affect not only their intended audience, but also "their medical colleagues, other health care professionals, as well as institutions with which they are affiliated." They should also recognize that audiences may misunderstand the information physicians provide as personal medical advice.

In the second instance, physicians in the media should ensure that the medical information they provide is accurate, appropriately conveys known risks and benefits, is "commensurate with their medical expertise" and based "on valid scientific evidence and insight gained from professional experience." It is ethically inappropriate for physicians to publicly recommend behaviors or interventions that are not scientifically well grounded.

Physicians in the media have a responsibility to be candid about the limits of their own expertise, and to acknowledge when there is lack of consensus within the profession. Ideally, they will avoid media appearances that create conflict of interest. When they have, or may be perceived to have, a conflict that should be disclosed.

Physicians must recognize that in the public sphere, even when they speak as individuals, they will be seen "as professionals who have committed themselves to the values and norms of medicine" (Opinion 10.1, "Physicians in nonclinical roles"). They have a fundamental responsibility to uphold the integrity of the medical profession.

Additional ethics guidance in a pandemic

The AMA offers an overview of foundational guidance regarding medical ethics for health care professionals and institutions responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.