

Physician Stewardship of Health Care Resources

Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 11.1.2

Physicians' primary ethical obligation is to promote the well-being of individual patients. Physicians also have a long-recognized obligation to patients in general to promote public health and access to care. This obligation requires physicians to be prudent stewards of the shared societal resources with which they are entrusted. Managing health care resources responsibly for the benefit of all patients is compatible with physicians' primary obligation to serve the interests of individual patients.

To fulfill their obligation to be prudent stewards of health care resources, physicians should:

- (a) Base recommendations and decisions on patients' medical needs.
- (b) Use scientifically grounded evidence to inform professional decisions when available.
- (c) Help patients articulate their health care goals and help patients and their families form realistic expectations about whether a particular intervention is likely to achieve those goals.
- (d) Endorse recommendations that offer reasonable likelihood of achieving the patient's health care goals.
- (e) Use technologies that have been demonstrated to meaningfully improve clinical outcomes to choose the course of action that requires fewer resources when alternative courses of action offer similar likelihood and degree of anticipated benefit compared to anticipated harm for the individual patient but require different levels of resources.
- (f) Be transparent about alternatives, including disclosing when resource constraints play a role in decision making.
- (g) Participate in efforts to resolve persistent disagreement about whether a costly intervention is worthwhile, which may include consulting other physicians, an ethics committee, or other appropriate resource.

Physicians are in a unique position to affect health care spending. But individual physicians alone cannot and should not be expected to address the systemic challenges of wisely managing health care resources. Medicine as a profession must create conditions for practice that make it feasible for individual physicians to be prudent stewards by:

- (h) Encouraging health care administrators and organizations to make cost data transparent (including cost accounting methodologies) so that physicians can exercise well-informed stewardship.
- (i) Advocating that health care organizations make available well-validated technologies to enhance diagnosis, treatment planning, and prognosis and support equitable, prudent use of health care resources.
- (j) Ensuring that physicians have the training they need to be informed about health care costs and how their decisions affect resource utilization and overall health care spending.
- (k) Advocating for policy changes, such as medical liability reform, that promote professional judgment and address systemic barriers that impede responsible stewardship.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I, V, VII, VIII, IX

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