Patient-Physician Relationships

Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 1.1.1

The practice of medicine, and its embodiment in the clinical encounter between a patient and a physician, is fundamentally a moral activity that arises from the imperative to care for patients and to alleviate suffering. The relationship between a patient and a physician is based on trust, which gives rise to physicians’ ethical responsibility to place patients’ welfare above the physician’s own self-interest or obligations to others, to use sound medical judgment on patients’ behalf, and to advocate for their patients’ welfare.

A patient-physician relationship exists when a physician serves a patient’s medical needs. Generally, the relationship is entered into by mutual consent between physician and patient (or surrogate).

However, in certain circumstances a limited patient-physician relationship may be created without the patient’s (or surrogate’s) explicit agreement. Such circumstances include:

1. (ʼ) When a physician provides emergency care or provides care at the request of the patient’s treating physician. In these circumstances, the patient’s (or surrogate’s) agreement to the relationship is implicit.
2. (ʼ) When a physician provides medically appropriate care for a prisoner under court order, in keeping with ethics guidance on court-initiated treatment.
3. (ʼ) When a physician examines a patient in the context of an independent medical examination, in keeping with ethics guidance. In such situations, a limited patient-physician relationship exists.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I, II, IV, VIII

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