

# Medical students: Know the fundamentals of medical ethics

OCT 27, 2020

**Timothy M. Smith**

Senior News Writer

---

The first principle of the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics* reads, “A physician shall be dedicated to providing competent medical care with compassion and respect for human dignity and rights.” But to achieve and maintain this, physicians need to grasp several principles of medical ethics. That is the case in ordinary times, and it is especially true during a global pandemic that is testing patients and physicians in new ways.

An education module offered via the [AMA Ed Hub™](#) gives medical students a point of entry to this indispensable element of clinical practice. It also examines how systems-based care presents new ethical challenges and explains the connection between ethics and law in U.S. health care.

The AMA Ed Hub is an online platform that brings together all the high-quality CME, maintenance of certification and educational content you need—in one place—with activities relevant to you, automated credit tracking and reporting for some states and specialty boards.

The free online CME module—“[Identifying the Fundamentals of Medical Ethics](#)”—is one of 13 modules released as part of the [Health Systems Science Learning Series](#).

Find out more about how these modules offer medical students insight on health systems science.

Medical ethics is not a matter of common sense. Instead, it requires ongoing study, especially in light of changing care models. The module takes learners through three foundational topics:

## Understanding ethical principles

Physicians have responsibilities to numerous health care stakeholders, including patients, other health professionals, society and themselves. Still, their foremost responsibility is to patients, and practicing medical ethics can strengthen patient-physician relationships.

Meanwhile, physicians are expected to uphold professional standards of conduct and know how to navigate relationships with other health professionals while addressing patient desires in the context of a course of care. Knowledge checks at the end of this section explore interdisciplinary care and communication.

## Navigating systems-based practice

Practicing patient-centered care can sometimes conflict with the physician's responsibility to the community for stewardship of resources. In addition, relationships between patients and physicians are embedded in complex webs of health care organizations and payers, wherein models for controlling costs, improving patient safety and improving quality can produce unintended negative effects on patients.

Telemedicine, health insurance, augmented intelligence and EHRs are all features of systems-based practice that involve ethical challenges. A knowledge check evaluates four options for influencing systems-based care to support physicians' ability to put patients first.

## Distinguishing between ethics, law

In health care, as in other domains, what's illegal is usually unethical, but what's unethical is not always illegal. In fact, ethical responsibilities are usually broader than legal duties. Fiduciary duty—a legal term—is a crucial concept to grasp in medical ethics, as it involves a confidence or trust wherein one party acts in the best interests of another, which, of course, is a defining feature of the patient-physician relationship.

Conflict of interest, privacy, confidentiality and informed consent are key concepts as well. Three real-life scenarios examine the importance of informed consent, and a knowledge check considers potential outcomes if informed consent is not followed.

## More study help

The AMA also recently released the second edition of the *Health Systems Science* textbook, published by Elsevier, which is a framework for this third pillar of medical education. Health systems science is defined as the understanding of how health care is delivered, how health care professionals work together to deliver that care, and how the health system can improve patient care and health care delivery. *Health Systems Science Review was published last year.* Both books are available for



purchase from the [AMA Store](#).

The AMA also offers an overview of ethics guidance during a pandemic.