

CHAPTER 1: OPINIONS ON PATIENT-PHYSICIAN RELATIONSHIPS

The Opinions in this chapter are offered as ethics guidance for physicians and are not intended to establish standards of clinical practice or rules of law.

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1.1.1 Patient-Physician Relationships

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 physicians' ethical responsibility to place patients' welfare above the physician's own self-interest or obligations to others, to 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:

- (a) 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.

- (b) When a physician provides medically appropriate care for a prisoner under court order, in keeping with ethical guidelines on court-initiated treatment.
- (c) When a physician examines a patient in the context of an independent medical examination, in keeping with ethical guidelines. In such situations, a limited patient-physician relationship exists.

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

1.1.2 Prospective Patients

As professionals dedicated to protecting the well-being of patients, physicians have an ethical obligation to provide care in cases of medical emergency. Physicians must also uphold ethical responsibilities not to discriminate against a prospective patient on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, or other personal or social characteristics that are not clinically relevant to the individual's care. Nor may physicians decline a patient based solely on the individual's infectious disease status. Physicians should not decline patients for whom they have accepted a contractual obligation to provide care.

However, physicians are not ethically required to accept all prospective patients. Physicians should be thoughtful in exercising their right to choose whom to serve.

A physician may decline to establish a patient-physician relationship with a prospective patient, or provide specific care to an existing patient, in certain limited circumstances:

- (a) The patient requests care that is beyond the physician's competence or scope of practice; is known to be scientifically invalid, has no medical indication, or cannot reasonably be expected to achieve the intended clinical benefit; or is incompatible with the physician's deeply held personal, religious, or moral beliefs in keeping with ethical guidelines on exercise of conscience.
- (b) The physician lacks the resources needed to provide safe, competent, respectful care for the individual. Physicians may not decline to accept a patient for reasons that would constitute discrimination against a class or category of patients
- (c) Meeting the medical needs of the prospective patient could seriously compromise the physician's ability to provide the care needed by his or her other patients. The greater the prospective patient's medical need, however, the stronger is the physician's obligation to provide care, in keeping with the professional obligation to promote access to care.
- (d) The individual is abusive or threatens the physician, staff, or other patients, unless the physician is legally required to provide emergency medical care. Physicians should be aware of the possibility that an underlying medical condition may contribute to this behavior.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,VI,VIII,X

1.1.3 Patient Rights

The health and well-being of patients depends on a collaborative effort between patient and physician in a mutually respectful alliance. Patients contribute to this alliance when they fulfill responsibilities they have, to seek care and to be candid with their physicians, for example.

Physicians can best contribute to a mutually respectful alliance with patients by serving as their patients' advocates and by respecting patients' rights. These include the right:

- (a) To courtesy, respect, dignity, and timely, responsive attention to his or her needs.
- (b) To receive information from their physicians and to have opportunity to discuss the benefits, risks, and costs of appropriate treatment alternatives, including the risks, benefits and costs of forgoing treatment. Patients should be able to expect that their physicians will provide guidance about what they consider the optimal course of action for the patient based on the physician's objective professional judgment.
- (c) To ask questions about their health status or recommended treatment when they do not fully understand what has been described and to have their questions answered.
- (d) To make decisions about the care the physician recommends and to have those decisions respected. A patient who has decision-making capacity may accept or refuse any recommended medical intervention.
- (e) To have the physician and other staff respect the patient's privacy and confidentiality.
- (f) To obtain copies or summaries of their medical records.
- (g) To obtain a second opinion.
- (h) To be advised of any conflicts of interest their physician may have in respect to their care.
- (i) To continuity of care. Patients should be able to expect that their physician will cooperate in coordinating medically indicated care with other health care professionals, and that the physician will not discontinue treating them when further treatment is medically indicated without giving them sufficient notice and reasonable assistance in making alternative arrangements for care.

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

1.1.4 Patient Responsibilities

Successful medical care requires ongoing collaboration between patients and physicians. Their partnership requires both individuals to take an active role in the healing process.

Autonomous, competent patients control the decisions that direct their health care. With that exercise of self-governance and choice comes a number of responsibilities. Patients contribute to the collaborative effort when they:

- (a) Are truthful and forthcoming with their physicians and strive to express their concerns clearly. Physicians likewise should encourage patients to raise questions or concerns.
- (b) Provide as complete a medical history as they can, including providing information about past illnesses, medications, hospitalizations, family history of illness, and other matters relating to present health.
- (c) Cooperate with agreed-on treatment plans. Since adhering to treatment is often essential to public and individual safety, patients should disclose whether they have or have not followed the agreed-on plan and indicate when they would like to reconsider the plan.
- (d) Accept care from medical students, residents, and other trainees under appropriate supervision. Participation in medical education is to the mutual benefit of patients and the health care system; nonetheless, patients' (or surrogates') refusal of care by a trainee should be respected in keeping with ethical guidelines.
- (e) Meet their financial responsibilities with regard to medical care or discuss financial hardships with their physicians. Patients should be aware of costs associated with using a limited resource like health care and try to use medical resources judiciously.
- (f) Recognize that a healthy lifestyle can often prevent or mitigate illness and take responsibility to follow preventive measures and adopt health-enhancing behaviors.
- (g) Be aware of and refrain from behavior that unreasonably places the health of others at risk. They should ask about what they can do to prevent transmission of infectious disease.
- (h) Refrain from being disruptive in the clinical setting.
- (i) Not knowingly initiate or participate in medical fraud.
- (j) Report illegal or unethical behavior by physicians or other health care professionals to the appropriate medical societies, licensing boards, or law enforcement authorities.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,IV,VI

1.1.5 Terminating a Patient-Physician Relationship

Physicians' fiduciary responsibility to patients entails an obligation to support continuity of care for their patients. At the beginning of patient-physician relationship, the physician should alert the patient to any foreseeable impediments to continuity of care.

When considering withdrawing from a case, physicians:

- (a) Must notify the patient (or authorized decision maker) long enough in advance to permit the patient to secure another physician.
- (b) Must facilitate transfer of care when appropriate.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,VI

1.1.6 Quality

As professionals dedicated to promoting the well-being of patients, physicians individually and collectively share the obligation to ensure that the care patients receive is safe, effective, patient centered, timely, efficient, and equitable.

While responsibility for quality of care does not rest solely with physicians, their role is essential. Individually and collectively, physicians should actively engage in efforts to improve the quality of health care by:

- (a) Keeping current with best care practices and maintaining professional competence.
- (b) Holding themselves accountable to patients, families, and fellow health care professionals for communicating effectively and coordinating care appropriately.
- (c) Monitoring the quality of care they deliver as individual practitioners—e.g., through personal case review and critical self-reflection, peer review, and use of other quality improvement tools.
- (d) Demonstrating commitment to develop, implement, and disseminate appropriate, well- defined quality and performance improvement measures in their daily practice.
- (e) Participating in educational, certification, and quality improvement activities that are well designed and consistent with the core values of the medical profession.

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

1.1.7 Physician Exercise of Conscience

Physicians are expected to uphold the ethical norms of their profession, including fidelity to patients and respect for patient self-determination. Yet physicians are not defined solely by their profession. They are moral agents in their own right and, like their patients, are informed by and committed to diverse cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions and beliefs. For some physicians, their professional calling is imbued with their foundational beliefs as persons, and at times the expectation that physicians will put patients' needs and preferences first may be in tension with the need to sustain moral integrity and continuity across both personal and professional life.

Preserving opportunity for physicians to act (or to refrain from acting) in accordance with the dictates of conscience in their professional practice is important for preserving the integrity of the medical profession as well as the integrity of the individual physician, on which patients and the public rely. Thus physicians should have considerable latitude to practice in accord with well-considered, deeply held beliefs that are central to their self-identities.

Physicians' freedom to act according to conscience is not unlimited, however. Physicians are expected to provide care in emergencies, honor patients' informed decisions to refuse life-sustaining treatment, and respect basic civil liberties and not discriminate against individuals in deciding whether to enter into a professional relationship with a new patient.

In other circumstances, physicians may be able to act (or refrain from acting) in accordance with the dictates of their conscience without violating their professional obligations. Several factors impinge on the decision to act according to conscience. Physicians have stronger obligations to patients with whom they have a patient-physician relationship, especially one of long standing; when there is imminent risk of foreseeable harm to the patient or delay in access to treatment would significantly adversely affect the patient's physical or emotional well-being; and when the patient is not reasonably able to access needed treatment from another qualified physician.

In following conscience, physicians should:

- (a) Thoughtfully consider whether and how significantly an action (or declining to act) will undermine the physician's personal integrity, create emotional or moral distress for the physician, or compromise the physician's ability to provide care for the individual and other patients.
- (b) Before entering into a patient-physician relationship, make clear any specific interventions or services the physician cannot in good conscience provide because they are contrary to the physician's deeply held personal beliefs, focusing on interventions or services a patient might otherwise reasonably expect the practice to offer.
- (c) Take care that their actions do not discriminate against or unduly burden individual patients or populations of patients and do not adversely affect patient or public trust.
- (d) Be mindful of the burden their actions may place on fellow professionals.
- (e) Uphold standards of informed consent and inform the patient about all relevant options for treatment, including options to which the physician morally objects.
- (f) In general, physicians should refer a patient to another physician or institution to provide treatment the physician declines to offer. When a deeply held, well-considered personal belief leads a physician also to decline to refer, the physician should offer impartial guidance to patients about how to inform themselves regarding access to desired services.
- (g) Continue to provide other ongoing care for the patient or formally terminate the patient-physician relationship in keeping with ethical guidelines.

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

1.2.1 Treating Self or Family

Treating oneself or a member of one's own family poses several challenges for physicians, including concerns about professional objectivity, patient autonomy, and informed consent.

When the patient is an immediate family member, the physician's personal feelings may unduly influence his or her professional medical judgment. Or the physician may fail to probe sensitive areas when taking the medical history or to perform intimate parts of the physical examination. Physicians may feel obligated to provide care for family members despite feeling uncomfortable doing so. They may also be inclined to treat problems that are beyond their expertise or training.

Similarly, patients may feel uncomfortable receiving care from a family member. A patient may be reluctant to disclose sensitive information or undergo an intimate examination when the physician is an immediate family member. This discomfort may particularly be the case when the patient is a minor child, who may not feel free to refuse care from a parent.

In general, physicians should not treat themselves or members of their own families. However, it may be acceptable to do so in limited circumstances:

- (a) In emergency settings or isolated settings where there is no other qualified physician available. In such situations, physicians should not hesitate to treat themselves or family members until another physician becomes available.
- (b) For short-term, minor problems.

When treating self or family members, physicians have a further responsibility to:

- (c) Document treatment or care provided and convey relevant information to the patient's primary care physician.
- (d) Recognize that if tensions develop in the professional relationship with a family member, perhaps as a result of a negative medical outcome, such difficulties may be carried over into the family member's personal relationship with the physician.
- (e) Avoid providing sensitive or intimate care especially for a minor patient who is uncomfortable being treated by a family member.
- (f) Recognize that family members may be reluctant to state their preference for another physician or decline a recommendation for fear of offending the physician.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,II,IV

1.2.2 Disruptive Behavior by Patients

The relationship between patients and physicians is based on trust and should serve to promote patients' well-being while respecting their dignity and rights.

Disrespectful or derogatory language or conduct on the part of either physicians or patients can undermine trust and compromise the integrity of the patient-physician relationship. It can make members of targeted groups reluctant to seek care, and create an environment that strains relationships among patients, physicians, and the health care team.

Trust can be established and maintained only when there is mutual respect. Therefore, in their interactions with patients, physicians should:

- (a) Recognize that derogatory or disrespectful language or conduct can cause psychological harm to those they target.
- (b) Always treat their patients with compassion and respect.

- (c) Terminate the patient-physician relationship with a patient who uses derogatory language or acts in a prejudicial manner only if the patient will not modify the conduct. In such cases, the physician should arrange to transfer the patient's care.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,II,VI,IX

1.2.3 Consultation, Referral & Second Opinions

Physicians' fiduciary obligation to promote patients' best interests and welfare can include consulting other physicians for advice in the care of the patient or referring patients to other professionals to provide care.

When physicians seek or provide consultation about a patient's care or refer a patient for health care services, including diagnostic laboratory services, they should:

- (a) Base the decision or recommendation on the patient's medical needs, as they would for any treatment recommendation, and consult or refer the patient to only health care professionals who have appropriate knowledge and skills and are licensed to provide the services needed.
- (b) Share patients' health information in keeping with ethical guidelines on confidentiality.
- (c) Assure the patient that he or she may seek a second opinion or choose someone else to provide a recommended consultation or service. Physicians should urge patients to familiarize themselves with any restrictions associated with their individual health plan that may bear on their decision, such as additional out-of-pocket costs to the patient for referrals or care outside a designated panel of providers.
- (d) Explain the rationale for the consultation, opinion, or findings and recommendations clearly to the patient.
- (e) Respect the terms of any contractual relationships they may have with health care organizations or payers that affect referrals and consultation.

Physicians may not terminate a patient-physician relationship solely because the patient seeks recommendations or care from a health care professional whom the physician has not recommended.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: IV,V,VI

1.2.4 Use of Chaperones

Efforts to provide a comfortable and considerate atmosphere for the patient and the physician are part of respecting patients' dignity. These efforts may include providing appropriate gowns, private facilities for undressing, sensitive use of draping, and clearly explaining various components of the physical examination. They also include having chaperones available. Having chaperones present can also help prevent misunderstandings between patient and physician.

Physicians should:

- (a) Adopt a policy that patients are free to request a chaperone and ensure that the policy is communicated to patients.
- (b) Always honor a patient's request to have a chaperone.
- (c) Have an authorized member of the health care team serve as a chaperone. Physicians should establish clear expectations that chaperones will uphold professional standards of privacy and confidentiality.
- (d) In general, use a chaperone even when a patient's trusted companion is present.
- (e) Provide opportunity for private conversation with the patient without the chaperone present. Physicians should minimize inquiries or history taking of a sensitive nature during a chaperoned examination.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,IV

1.2.5 Sports Medicine

Many professional and amateur athletic activities, including contact sports, can put participants at risk of injury. Physicians can provide valuable information to help sports participants, dancers, and others make informed decisions about whether to initiate or continue participating in such activities.

Physicians who serve in a medical capacity at athletic, sporting, or other physically demanding events should protect the health and safety of participants.

In this capacity, physicians should:

- (a) Base their judgment about an individual's participation solely on medical considerations.
- (b) Not allow the desires of spectators, promoters of the event, or even the injured individual to govern a decision about whether to remove the participant from the event.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,VII

1.2.6 Work-Related & Independent Medical Examinations

Physicians who are employed by businesses or insurance companies, or who provide medical examinations within their realm of specialty as independent contractors, to assess individuals' health or disability face a conflict of duties. They have responsibilities both to the patient and to the employer or third party.

Such industry-employed physicians or independent medical examiners establish limited patient-physician relationships. Their relationships with patients are limited to the isolated examination; they do not monitor patients' health over time, treat them, or carry out many other duties fulfilled by physicians in the traditional fiduciary role.

In keeping with their core obligations as medical professionals, physicians who practice as industry-employed physicians or independent medical examiners should:

- (a) Disclose the nature of the relationship with the employer or third party and that the physician is acting as an agent of the employer or third party before gathering health information from the patient.
- (b) Explain that the physician's role in this context is to assess the patient's health or disability independently and objectively. The physician should further explain the differences between this practice and the traditional fiduciary role of a physician.
- (c) Protect patients' personal health information in keeping with professional standards of confidentiality.
- (d) Inform the patient about important incidental findings the physician discovers during the examination. When appropriate, the physician should suggest the patient seek care from a qualified physician and, if requested, provide reasonable assistance in securing follow-up care.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I

1.2.7 Use of Restraints

All individuals have a fundamental right to be free from unreasonable bodily restraint. At times, however, health conditions may result in behavior that puts patients at risk of harming themselves. In such situations, it may be ethically justifiable for physicians to order the use of chemical or physical restraint to protect the patient.

Except in emergencies, patients should be restrained only on a physician's explicit order. Patients should never be restrained punitively, for convenience, or as an alternate to reasonable staffing.

Physicians who order chemical or physical restraints should:

- (a) Use best professional judgment to determine whether restraint is clinically indicated for the individual patient.
- (b) Obtain the patient's informed consent to the use of restraint, or the consent of the patient's surrogate when the patient lacks decision-making capacity. Physicians should explain to the patient or surrogate:
 - (i) why restraint is recommended;
 - (ii) what type of restraint will be used;
 - (iii) length of time for which restraint is intended to be used.
- (c) Regularly review the need for restraint and document the review and resulting decision in the patient's medical record.

In certain limited situations, when a patient poses a significant danger to self or others, it may be

appropriate to restrain the patient involuntarily. In such situations, the least restrictive restraint reasonable should be implemented and the restraint should be removed promptly when no longer needed.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,IV

1.2.8 Gifts from Patients

Patients offer gifts to a physician for many reasons. Some gifts are offered as an expression of gratitude or a reflection of the patient's cultural tradition. Accepting gifts offered for these reasons can enhance the patient-physician relationship.

Other gifts may signal psychological needs that require the physician's attention. Some patients may offer gifts or cash to secure or influence care or to secure preferential treatment. Such gifts can undermine physicians' obligation to provide services fairly to all patients; accepting them is likely to damage the patient-physician relationship.

The interaction of these factors is complex and physicians should consider them sensitively before accepting or declining a gift.

Physicians to whom a patient offers a gift should:

- (a) Be sensitive to the gift's value relative to the patient's or physician's means. Physicians should decline gifts that are disproportionately or inappropriately large, or when the physician would be uncomfortable to have colleagues know the gift had been accepted.
- (b) Not allow the gift or offer of a gift to influence the patient's medical care.
- (c) Decline a bequest from a patient if the physician has reason to believe accepting the gift would present an emotional or financial hardship to the patient's family.
- (d) Physicians may wish to suggest that the patient or family make a charitable contribution in lieu of the bequest, in keeping with ethical guidelines.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,II

1.2.9 Use of Remote Sensing & Monitoring Devices

Sensing and monitoring devices can benefit patients by allowing physicians and other health care professionals to obtain timely information about the patient's vital signs or health status without requiring an in-person, face-to-face encounter. Implantable devices can also enable physicians to identify patients rapidly and expedite access to patients' medical records. Devices that transmit patient information wirelessly to remote receiving stations can offer convenience for both patients and physicians, enhance the efficiency and quality of care, and promote increased access to care, but also raise concerns about safety and the confidentiality of patient information.

Individually, physicians who employ remote sensing and monitoring devices in providing patient care should:

- (a) Determine whether using one or more such devices is appropriate in light of individual patients' medical needs and circumstances, including patients' ability to use the chosen device appropriately.
- (b) Explain how the device(s) will be used in the patient's care and what will be expected of the patient in using the technology, and disclose any limitations, risks, or medical uncertainties associated with the device(s) and data transmission.
- (c) Obtain the patient's or surrogate's informed consent before implementing the device in treatment.

Collectively, physicians should:

- (d) Support research into the safety, efficacy, and possible non-medical uses of remote sensing and monitoring devices, including devices intended to transmit biometric data and implantable radio frequency ID devices.
- (e) Advocate for appropriate oversight of remote sensing and monitoring devices.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,III,V

1.2.10 Political Action by Physicians

Like all Americans, physicians enjoy the right to advocate for change in law and policy, in the public arena, and within their institutions. Indeed, physicians have an ethical responsibility to seek change when they believe the requirements of law or policy are contrary to the best interests of patients. However, they have a responsibility to do so in ways that are not disruptive to patient care.

Physicians who participate in advocacy activities should:

- (a) Ensure that the health of patients is not jeopardized and that patient care is not compromised.
- (b) Avoid using disruptive means to press for reform. Strikes and other collection actions may reduce access to care, eliminate or delay needed care, and interfere with continuity of care and should not be used as a bargaining tactic. In rare circumstances, briefly limiting personal availability may be appropriate as a means of calling attention to the need for changes in patient care. Physicians should be aware that some actions may put them or their organizations at risk of violating antitrust laws or laws pertaining to medical licensure or malpractice.
- (c) Avoid forming workplace alliances, such as unions, with workers who do not share physicians' primary and overriding commitment to patients.
- (d) Refrain from using undue influence or pressure colleagues to participate in advocacy activities and should not punish colleagues, overtly or covertly, for deciding not to participate.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,III,VI

1.2.11 Ethically Sound Innovation in Medical Practice

Innovation in medicine can range from improving an existing intervention, to introducing an innovation in one's own clinical practice for the first time, to using an existing intervention in a novel way or translating knowledge from one clinical context into another. Innovation shares features with both research and patient care, but is distinct from both.

When physicians participate in developing and disseminating innovative practices, they act in accord with professional responsibilities to advance medical knowledge, improve quality of care, and promote the well-being of individual patients and the larger community. Similarly, these responsibilities are honored when physicians enhance their own practices by expanding the range of techniques and interventions they offer to patients.

Individually, physicians who are involved in designing, developing, disseminating, or adopting innovative modalities should:

- (a) Innovate on the basis of sound scientific evidence and appropriate clinical expertise.
- (b) Seek input from colleagues or other medical professionals in advance or as early as possible in the course of innovation.
- (c) Design innovations so as to minimize risks to individual patients and maximize the likelihood of application and benefit for populations of patients.
- (d) Be sensitive to the cost implications of innovation; and
- (e) Be aware of influences that may drive the creation and adoption of innovative practices for reasons other than patient or public benefit.

When they offer existing innovative diagnostic or therapeutic services to individual patients, physicians must:

- (f) Base recommendations on patients' medical needs.
- (g) Refrain from offering such services until they have acquired appropriate knowledge and skills.
- (h) Recognize that in this context informed decision making requires the physician to disclose:
 - (i) how a recommended diagnostic or therapeutic service differs from the standard therapeutic approach if one exists;
 - (ii) why the physician is recommending the innovative modality;
 - (iii) what the known or anticipated risks, benefits, and burdens of the recommended therapy and alternatives are;
 - (iv) what experience the professional community in general and the physician individually has had to date with the innovative therapy; and

- (v) what conflicts of interest the physician may have with respect to the recommended therapy.
- (i) Discontinue any innovative therapies that are not benefiting the patient; and
- (j) Be transparent and share findings from their use of innovative therapies with peers in some manner. To promote patient safety and quality, physicians should share both immediate or delayed positive and negative outcomes.

To promote responsible innovation, the medical profession should:

- (k) Require that physicians who adopt innovative treatment or diagnostic techniques into their practice have appropriate knowledge and skills.
- (l) Provide meaningful professional oversight of innovation in patient care; and
- (m) Encourage physician-innovators to collect and share information about the resources needed to implement their innovative therapies effectively.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: V,VIII

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