

CHAPTER 8: OPINIONS ON PHYSICIANS & THE HEALTH OF THE COMMUNITY

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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8.1 Routine Universal Screening for HIV

Physicians' primary ethical obligation is to their individual patients. However, physicians also have a long-recognized responsibility to participate in activities to protect and promote the health of the public. Routine universal screening of adult patients for HIV helps promote the welfare of individual patients, avoid injury to third parties, and protect public health.

Medical and social advances have enhanced the benefits of knowing one's HIV status and at the same time have minimized the need for specific written informed consent prior to HIV testing. Nonetheless, the ethical tenets of respect for autonomy and informed consent require that physicians continue to seek patients' informed consent, including informed refusal of HIV testing.

To protect the welfare and interests of individual patients and fulfill their public health obligations in the context of HIV, physicians should:

- (a) Support routine, universal screening of adult patients for HIV with opt-out provisions.
- (b) Make efforts to persuade reluctant patients to be screened, including explaining potential benefits to the patient and to the patient's close contacts.
- (c) Continue to uphold respect for autonomy by respecting a patient's informed decision to opt out.
- (d) Test patients without prior consent only in limited cases in which the harms to individual autonomy are offset by significant benefits to known third parties, such as testing to protect occupationally exposed health care professionals or patients.
- (e) Work to ensure that patients who are identified as HIV positive receive appropriate follow-up care and counseling.
- (f) Attempt to persuade patients who are identified as HIV positive to cease endangering others.
- (g) Be aware of and adhere to state and local guidelines regarding public health reporting and disclosure of HIV status when a patient who is identified as HIV positive poses significant risk of infecting an

identifiable third party. The doctor may, if permitted, notify the endangered third party without revealing the identity of the source person.

- (h) Safeguard the confidentiality of patient information to the greatest extent possible when required to report HIV status.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I, VI, VII

8.2 Impaired Drivers & Their Physicians

A variety of medical conditions can impair an individual's ability to operate a motor vehicle safely, whether a personal car or boat or a commercial vehicle, such as a bus, train, plane, or commercial vessel. Those who operate a vehicle when impaired by a medical condition pose threats to both public safety and their own well-being. Physicians have unique opportunities to assess the impact of physical and mental conditions on patients' ability to drive safely and have a responsibility to do so in light of their professional obligation to protect public health and safety. In deciding whether or how to intervene when a patient's medical condition may impair driving, physicians must balance dual responsibilities to promote the welfare and confidentiality of the individual patient, and to protect public safety.

Not all physicians are in a position to evaluate the extent or effect of a medical condition on a patient's ability to drive, particularly physicians who treat patients only on a short-term basis. Nor do all physicians necessarily have appropriate training to identify and evaluate physical or mental conditions in relation to the ability to drive. In such situations, it may be advisable to refer a potentially at-risk patient for assessment.

To serve the interests of their patients and the public, within their areas of expertise physicians should:

- (a) Assess at-risk patients individually for medical conditions that might adversely affect driving ability, using best professional judgment and keeping in mind that not all physical or mental impairments create an obligation to intervene.
- (b) Tactfully but candidly discuss driving risks with the patient and, when appropriate, the family when a medical condition may adversely affect the patient's ability to drive safely. Help the patient (and family) formulate a plan to reduce risks, including options for treatment or therapy if available, changes in driving behavior, or other adjustments.
- (c) Recognize that safety standards for those who operate commercial transportation are governed by federal medical standards and may differ from standards for private licenses.
- (d) Be aware of applicable state requirements for reporting to the licensing authority those patients whose impairments may compromise their ability to operate a motor vehicle safely.
- (e) Prior to reporting, explain to the patient (and family, as appropriate) that the physician may have an obligation to report a medically at-risk driver:
 - (i) when the physician identifies a medical condition clearly related to the ability to drive;
 - (ii) when continuing to drive poses a clear risk to public safety or the patient's own well-being and the patient ignores the physician's advice to discontinue driving; or
 - (iii) when required by law.

- (f) Inform the patient that the determination of inability to drive safely will be made by other authorities, not the physician.
- (g) Disclose only the minimum necessary information when reporting a medically at-risk driver, in keeping with ethical guidelines on respect for patient privacy and confidentiality.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,III,IV,VII

8.3 Physicians' Responsibilities in Disaster Response & Preparedness

Whether at the national, regional, or local level, responses to disasters require extensive involvement from physicians individually and collectively. Because of their commitment to care for the sick and injured, individual physicians have an obligation to provide urgent medical care during disasters. This obligation holds even in the face of greater than usual risks to physicians' own safety, health, or life.

However, the physician workforce is not an unlimited resource. Therefore, when providing care in a disaster with its inherent dangers, physicians also have an obligation to evaluate the risks of providing care to individual patients versus the need to be available to provide care in the future.

With respect to disaster, whether natural or manmade, individual physicians should:

- (a) Take appropriate advance measures, including acquiring and maintaining appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure they are able to provide medical services when needed.

Collectively, physicians should:

- (b) Provide medical expertise and work with others to develop public health policies that:
 - (i) are designed to improve the effectiveness and availability of medical services during a disaster;
 - (ii) are based on sound science;
 - (iii) are based on respect for patients.
- (c) Advocate for and participate in ethically sound research to inform policy decisions.

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

8.4 Ethical Use of Quarantine & Isolation

Although physicians' primary ethical obligation is to their individual patients, they also have a long-recognized public health responsibility. In the context of infectious disease, this may include the use of quarantine and isolation to reduce the transmission of disease and protect the health of the public. In such situations, physicians have a further responsibility to protect their own health to ensure that they remain able to provide care. These responsibilities potentially conflict with patients' rights of self-determination and with physicians' duty to advocate for the best interests of individual patients and to provide care in emergencies.

With respect to the use of quarantine and isolation as public health interventions in situations of epidemic disease, individual physicians should:

- (a) Participate in implementing scientifically and ethically sound quarantine and isolation measures in keeping with the duty to provide care in epidemics.
- (b) Educate patients and the public about the nature of the public health threat, potential harm to others, and benefits of quarantine and isolation.
- (c) Encourage patients to adhere voluntarily to quarantine and isolation.
- (d) Support mandatory quarantine and isolation when a patient fails to adhere voluntarily.
- (e) Inform patients about and comply with mandatory public health reporting requirements.
- (f) Take appropriate protective and preventive measures to minimize transmission of infectious disease from physician to patient, including accepting immunization for vaccine-preventable disease, in keeping with ethical guidelines.
- (g) Seek medical evaluation and treatment if they suspect themselves to be infected, including adhering to mandated public health measures.

The medical profession, in collaboration with public health colleagues and civil authorities, has an ethical responsibility to:

- (h) Ensure that quarantine measures are ethically and scientifically sound:
 - (i) use the least restrictive means available to control disease in the community while protecting individual rights;
 - (ii) without bias against any class or category of patients.
- (i) Advocate for the highest possible level of confidentiality when personal health information is transmitted in the context of public health reporting.
- (j) Advocate for access to public health services to ensure timely detection of risks and implementation of public health interventions, including quarantine and isolation.
- (k) Advocate for protective and preventive measures for physicians and others caring for patients with communicable disease.
- (l) Develop educational materials and programs about quarantine and isolation as public health interventions for patients and the public.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,III,VI,VII,VIII

8.5 Disparities in Health Care

Stereotypes, prejudice, or bias based on gender expectations and other arbitrary evaluations of any individual can manifest in a variety of subtle ways. Differences in treatment that are not directly related to differences in individual patients' clinical needs or preferences constitute inappropriate variations in

health care. Such variations may contribute to health outcomes that are considerably worse in members of some populations than those of members of majority populations.

This represents a significant challenge for physicians, who ethically are called on to provide the same quality of care to all patients without regard to medically irrelevant personal characteristics.

To fulfill this professional obligation in their individual practices physicians should:

- (a) Provide care that meets patient needs and respects patient preferences.
- (b) Avoid stereotyping patients.
- (c) Examine their own practices to ensure that inappropriate considerations about race, gender identify, sexual orientation, sociodemographic factors, or other nonclinical factors, do not affect clinical judgment.
- (d) Work to eliminate biased behavior toward patients by other health care professionals and staff who come into contact with patients.
- (e) Encourage shared decision making.
- (f) Cultivate effective communication and trust by seeking to better understand factors that can influence patients' health care decisions, such as cultural traditions, health beliefs and health literacy, language or other barriers to communication and fears or misperceptions about the health care system.

The medical profession has an ethical responsibility to:

- (g) Help increase awareness of health care disparities.
- (h) Strive to increase the diversity of the physician workforce as a step toward reducing health care disparities.
- (i) Support research that examines health care disparities, including research on the unique health needs of all genders, ethnic groups, and medically disadvantaged populations, and the development of quality measures and resources to help reduce disparities.

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

8.6 Promoting Patient Safety

In the context of health care, an error is an unintended act or omission or a flawed system or plan that harms or has the potential to harm a patient. Patients have a right to know their past and present medical status, including conditions that may have resulted from medical error. Open communication is fundamental to the trust that underlies the patient-physician relationship, and physicians have an obligation to deal honestly with patients at all times, in addition to their obligation to promote patient welfare and safety. Concern regarding legal liability should not affect the physician's honesty with the patient.

Even when new information regarding the medical error will not alter the patient's medical treatment or therapeutic options, individual physicians who have been involved in a (possible) medical error should:

- (a) Disclose the occurrence of the error, explain the nature of the (potential) harm, and provide the information needed to enable the patient to make informed decisions about future medical care.
- (b) Acknowledge the error and express professional and compassionate concern toward patients who have been harmed in the context of health care.
- (c) Explain efforts that are being taken to prevent similar occurrences in the future.
- (d) Provide for continuity of care to patients who have been harmed during the course of care, including facilitating transfer of care when a patient has lost trust in the physician.

Physicians who have discerned that another health care professional (may have) erred in caring for a patient should:

- (e) Encourage the individual to disclose.
- (f) Report impaired or incompetent colleagues in keeping with ethical guidelines.

As professionals uniquely positioned to have a comprehensive view of the care patients receive, physicians must strive to ensure patient safety and should play a central role in identifying, reducing, and preventing medical errors. Both as individuals and collectively as a profession, physicians should:

- (g) Support a positive culture of patient safety, including compassion for peers who have been involved in a medical error.
- (h) Enhance patient safety by studying the circumstances surrounding medical error. A legally protected review process is essential for reducing health care errors and preventing patient harm.
- (i) Establish and participate fully in effective, confidential, protected mechanisms for reporting medical errors.
- (j) Participate in developing means for objective review and analysis of medical errors.
- (k) Ensure that investigation of root causes and analysis of error leads to measures to prevent future occurrences and that these measures are conveyed to relevant stakeholders.

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

8.7 Routine Universal Immunization of Physicians

As professionals committed to promoting the welfare of individual patients and the health of the public and to safeguarding their own and their colleagues' well-being, physicians have an ethical responsibility to take appropriate measures to prevent the spread of infectious disease in health care settings. Conscientious participation in routine infection control practices, such as hand washing and respiratory precautions, is a basic expectation of the profession. In some situations, however, routine infection control is not sufficient to protect the interests of patients, the public, and fellow health care workers.

In the context of a highly transmissible disease that poses significant medical risk for vulnerable patients or colleagues or threatens the availability of the health care workforce, particularly a disease that has potential to become epidemic or pandemic, and for which there is an available, safe, and effective vaccine, physicians should:

- (a) Accept immunization absent a recognized medical, religious, or philosophic reason to not be immunized.
- (b) Accept a decision of the medical staff leadership or health care institution, or other appropriate authority to adjust practice activities if not immunized (e.g., wear masks or refrain from direct patient care). It may be appropriate in some circumstances to inform patients about immunization status.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,II

8.8 Required Reporting of Adverse Events

Physicians' professional commitment to advance scientific knowledge and make relevant information available to patients, colleagues, and the public carries with it the responsibility to report suspected adverse events resulting from the use of a drug or medical device.

Mandated pre- and post-marketing studies provide basic safeguards for public health, but are inherently limited in their ability to detect rare or unexpected consequences of use of a drug or medical device. Thus spontaneous reports of adverse events, especially rare or delayed effects or effects in vulnerable populations are irreplaceable as a source of information about the safety of drugs and devices. As the professionals who prescribe and monitor the use of drugs and medical devices, physicians are best positioned to observe and communicate about adverse events.

Cases in which there is clearly a causal relationship between use of a drug/device and an adverse event, especially a serious event, will be rare. Physicians need not be certain that there is such an event, or even that there is a reasonable likelihood of a causal relationship, to suspect that an adverse event has occurred. A physician who suspects that an adverse reaction to a drug or medical device has occurred has an ethical responsibility to:

- (a) Communicate that information to the professional community through established reporting mechanisms.
- (b) Promptly report serious adverse events requiring hospitalization, death, or medical or surgical intervention to the appropriate regulatory agency.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,V,VII

8.9 Expedited Partner Therapy

Expedited partner therapy seeks to increase the rate of treatment for partners of patients with sexually transmitted infections through patient-delivered therapy without the partner receiving a medical evaluation or professional prevention counseling.

Although expedited partner therapy has been demonstrated to be effective at reducing the burden of certain diseases, such as gonorrhea and chlamydia, it also has ethical implications. Expedited partner therapy potentially abrogates the standard informed consent process, compromises continuity of care for patients' partners, encroaches upon the privacy of patients and their partners, increases the possibility of harm by a medical or allergic reaction, leaves other diseases or complications undiagnosed, and may violate state practice laws.

Before initiating expedited partner therapy, physicians should:

- (a) Determine the legal status of expedited partner therapy in the jurisdiction in which they practice.
- (b) Seek guidance from public health officials.
- (c) Engage in open discussions with patients to ascertain partners' ability to access medical services.
- (d) Initiate expedited partner therapy only when the physician reasonably believes that a patient's partner(s) will be unwilling or unable to seek treatment within the context of a traditional patient-physician relationship.

When initiating expedited partner therapy, physicians should:

- (e) Instruct patients regarding expedited partner therapy and the medications involved.
- (f) Answer any questions the patient has.
- (g) Provide to patients educational materials to share with their partners that:
 - (i) encourage the partner to consult a physician as a preferred alternative to expedited partner therapy;
 - (ii) disclose the risk of potential adverse drug reactions;
 - (iii) disclose the possibility of dangerous interactions between the medication delivered by the patient and other medications the partner may be taking;
 - (iv) disclose that the partner may be affected by other sexually transmitted diseases that may be left untreated by the medication delivered by the patient.
- (h) Make reasonable efforts to refer the patient's partner(s) to appropriate health care professionals.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: VII

8.10 Preventing, Identifying & Treating Violence & Abuse

All patients may be at risk for interpersonal violence and abuse, which may adversely affect their health or ability to adhere to medical recommendations. In light of their obligation to promote the well-being of patients, physicians have an ethical obligation to take appropriate action to avert the harms caused by violence and abuse.

To protect patients' well-being, physicians individually should:

- (a) Become familiar with:
 - (i) how to detect violence or abuse, including cultural variations in response to abuse;
 - (ii) community and health resources available to abused or vulnerable persons;

- (iii) public health measures that are effective in preventing violence and abuse;
 - (iv) legal requirements for reporting violence or abuse.
- (b) Consider abuse as a possible factor in the presentation of medical complaints.
 - (c) Routinely inquire about physical, sexual, and psychological abuse as part of the medical history.
 - (d) Not allow diagnosis or treatment to be influenced by misconceptions about abuse, including beliefs that abuse is rare, does not occur in “normal” families, is a private matter best resolved without outside interference, or is caused by victims’ own actions.
 - (e) Treat the immediate symptoms and sequelae of violence and abuse and provide ongoing care for patients to address long-term consequences that may arise from being exposed to violence and abuse.
 - (f) Discuss any suspicion of abuse sensitively with the patient, whether or not reporting is legally mandated, and direct the patient to appropriate community resources.
 - (g) Report suspected violence and abuse in keeping with applicable requirements. Before doing so, physicians should:
 - (i) inform patients about requirements to report;
 - (ii) obtain the patient’s informed consent when reporting is not required by law. Exceptions can be made if a physician reasonably believes that a patient’s refusal to authorize reporting is coerced and therefore does not constitute a valid informed treatment decision.
 - (h) Protect patient privacy when reporting by disclosing only the minimum necessary information.

Collectively, physicians should:

- (i) Advocate for comprehensive training in matters pertaining to violence and abuse across the continuum of professional education.
- (j) Provide leadership in raising awareness about the need to assess and identify signs of abuse, including advocating for guidelines and policies to reduce the volume of unidentified cases and help ensure that all patients are appropriately assessed.
- (k) Advocate for mechanisms to direct physicians to community or private resources that might be available to aid their patients.
- (l) Support research in the prevention of violence and abuse and collaborate with public health and community organizations to reduce violence and abuse.
- (m) Advocate for change in mandatory reporting laws if evidence indicates that such reporting is not in the best interests of patients.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: I,III

8.11 Health Promotion and Preventive Care

Medicine and public health share an ethical foundation stemming from the essential and direct role that health plays in human flourishing. While a physician's role tends to focus on diagnosing and treating illness once it occurs, physicians also have a professional commitment to prevent disease and promote health and well-being for their patients and the community.

The clinical encounter provides an opportunity for the physician to engage the patient in the process of health promotion. Effective elements of this process may include educating and motivating patients regarding healthy lifestyle, helping patients by assessing their needs, preferences, and readiness for change and recommending appropriate preventive care measures. Implementing effective health promotion practices is consistent with physicians' duties to patients and also with their responsibilities as stewards of health care resources.

While primary care physicians are typically the patient's main source for health promotion and disease prevention, specialists can play an important role, particularly when the specialist has a close or long-standing relationship with the patient or when recommended action is particularly relevant for the condition that the specialist is treating. Additionally, while all physicians must balance a commitment to individual patients with the health of the public, physicians who work solely or primarily in a public health capacity should uphold accepted standards of medical professionalism by implementing policies that appropriately balance individual liberties with the social goals of public health policies.

Health promotion should be a collaborative, patient-centered process that promotes trust and recognizes patients' self-directed roles and responsibilities in maintaining health. In keeping with their professional commitment to the health of patients and the public, physicians should:

- (a) Keep current with preventive care guidelines that apply to their patients and ensure that the interventions they recommend are well supported by the best available evidence.
- (b) Educate patients about relevant modifiable risk factors.
- (c) Recommend and encourage patients to have appropriate vaccinations and screenings.
- (d) Encourage an open dialogue regarding circumstances that may make it difficult to manage chronic conditions or maintain a healthy lifestyle, such as transportation, work and home environments, and social support systems.
- (e) Collaborate with the patient to develop recommendations that are most likely to be effective.
- (f) When appropriate, delegate health promotion activities to other professionals or other resources available in the community who can help counsel and educate patients.
- (g) Consider the health of the community when treating their own patients and identify and notify public health authorities if and when they notice patterns in patient health that may indicate a health risk for others.
- (h) Recognize that modeling health behaviors can help patients make changes in their own lives.

Collectively, physicians should:

- (i) Promote training in health promotion and disease prevention during medical school, residency and in continuing medical education.
- (j) Advocate for healthier schools, workplaces and communities.
- (k) Create or promote healthier work and training environments for physicians.
- (l) Advocate for community resources designed to promote health and provide access to preventive services.
- (m) Support research to improve the evidence for disease prevention and health promotion.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: V, VII

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