



CONFIDENTIAL

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Tackling Tough Ethical

“The difficulty in life is the choice,” wrote Irish novelist George Moore. As a resident you face some of life’s most challenging choices. Decisions you make affect the lives of others as well as your own. It’s important to understand some of the most commonly-faced issues of ethics and professionalism that face today’s physicians. It’s equally important to know where to turn when you’re faced with a decision you don’t feel comfortable making alone.

“One of the biggest issues residents face is conflict of interest,” says Peter J. Fabri, M.D., professor of surgery and associate dean for graduate medical education at the University of South Florida. Fabri says he sees conflicts arise most often in relation to the pharmaceutical industry and in end-of-life choices.

“A fair amount of what the pharmaceutical industry does is believed by the profession to be a conflict of interest,” says Fabri. “Pharmaceutical companies spend a huge amount of money to influence prescribing practices. This may

be done at arm’s length through educational programs and grants, but it also takes place through the wining and dining of physicians.”

Fabri also sees residents struggling with conflicts of interest in end-of-life decision situations. “Residents work long and hard to save lives, yet patients (or their family members, if the patient is incapable of making the decision), have a legal right to determine what will happen to them. Sometimes an individual or a family refuses even necessary medical treatment or makes a decision that goes against medical logic. When family members say ‘We want no more treatment for Dad,’ that creates a very difficult dilemma for the physician.”

There are no simple solutions, but residents should be aware of the profession’s guidelines for tricky questions of ethics. A good resource for reviewing the medical profession’s most current thought on these topics is the American Medical Association’s Web site, www.ama-assn.org. The site includes current

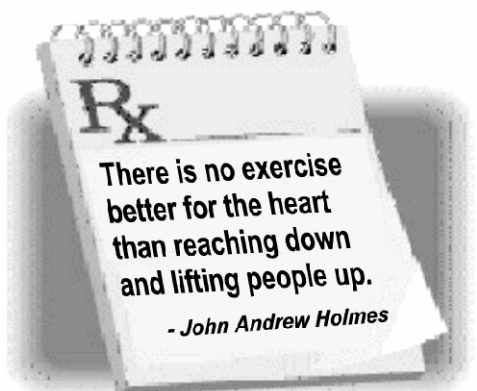
No one makes all the right choices, all the time. When you’re in doubt about how to deal with difficult choices at work or in your personal life, it can help to talk things out with a professional. We understand what you’re going through and we’re as close as your phone. The free, confidential Residents Assistance Program Hotline, **(813) 870-3344**, offered by Wood & Associates can provide advice and resources to help you move forward in your career and personal life.

opinions of the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs.

Questions of professionalism can also pose a challenge for some residents, Fabri observes, though he doesn’t see it as a problem of the same magnitude as ethics. “The profession has gone on record stating that there is a need to reinvest in the values and traditions associated with professionalism in medicine.”

“What we see is residents faced with societal values that are changing and moving

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\$\$\$ Money

Q. What ethics guidelines should I expect of the professionals who handle my insurance and financial planning?

A. Here are a few definitions and tips to help you understand what qualifications to look for.

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By Julio C. Muniz, Muniz and Associates, Tampa, Florida, a Certified Financial Planner (CFP) and a Chartered Life Underwriter (CLU).

Ethics, continued

toward more personal freedom. Not uncommonly, those values are at conflict with the professional values of being a physician. This puts people in a situation where they have to make a choice."

You show professionalism when you make the right choices. What do you do, for example, when you run late in the operating room on the night you have an anniversary dinner with your spouse planned? How do you react when one of your patients is in the emergency room with a heart attack and

you're expected at your child's soccer game?

When the answers to ethical and professional questions don't come easily, Fabri advises residents to seek out a program director, a more senior resident, a mentor or the Residents Assistance Program.

"Usually there are alternatives. The problems occur when an individual chooses unilaterally not to fulfill his or her responsibilities."

"The most important thing, in situations of conflicting professional and personal values, is to always put the patient first," concludes Fabri.

The medical profession has long subscribed to a body of ethical statements developed primarily for the benefit of the patient. As a member of this profession, a physician must recognize responsibility not only to patients, but also to society, to other health professionals, and to self. The following principles adopted by the American Medical Association are not laws, but standards of conduct that define the essentials of honorable behavior for the physician.

Principles of Medical Ethics

- I.** A physician shall be dedicated to providing competent medical service with compassion and respect for human dignity.
- II.** A physician shall deal honestly with patients and colleagues, and strive to expose those physicians deficient in character or competence, or who engage in fraud or deception.
- III.** A physician shall respect the law and recognize a responsibility to seek changes in those requirements which are contrary to the best interests of the patient.
- IV.** A physician shall respect the rights of patients, of colleagues, and of other health professionals, and shall safeguard patient confidences within the constraints of the law.
- V.** A physician shall continue to study, apply, and advance scientific knowledge, make relevant information available to patients, colleagues, and the public, obtain consultation, and use the talent of other health professionals when indicated.
- VI.** A physician shall, in the provision of appropriate patient care, except in emergencies, be free to choose whom to serve, with whom to associate, and the environment in which to provide medical services.
- VII.** A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to an improved community.

(Source: Code of Medical Ethics: Current Opinions With Annotations © 2000 American Medical Association.) www.ama-assn.org