



For you, your career, and your life

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Resident Assistance Program Newsletter

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Standing Your Ground When Ethics are At Stake

You're feeling like your brain will not absorb one more detail, and you are moving your body by sheer willpower. Now your supervisor is asking you to work on a complication with one of your patients. It's past your work-hour limit. But it's another good learning opportunity in your specialty. How do you handle this new request?

When in training, residents are often expected to be on duty for long hours—a situation that many medical educators and residents think is needed to gain the experience and knowledge required to become a competent physician. Yet as you have certainly noted, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) in 2003 instituted work hour standards for all accredited residency programs. Among the limits are



“The art of leadership is saying no, not yes. It is very easy to say yes.”

-Tony Blair

resident work weeks that average 80 hours over four weeks, with the longest consecutive period of work to 30 hours. These standards have been voluntarily adopted by residency programs, and hospitals face losing their accreditation if they're not followed.

The Institute of Medicine built upon these recommendations in a 2008 report. Intended to reduce total duty hours and sleep deprivation, it also seeks to minimize fatigue-related errors and improve patient well-being and safety. The reasons are valid and are clearly explained in training: studies have shown the effect of fatigue on learning and memory, and hospitals have a zero tolerance for errors.

Under this kind of pressure, residents may feel compelled to work extra hours and under-report the total at the request of a supervisor. There may be a lot to gain in terms of experience and exposure to learning situations. Yet there are consequences for the resident, patients, and possibly the

During your residency you will encounter situations that tax your knowledge, your ethics, your professionalism and your ability to make the right choice under the most stressful conditions. When you're wrestling with some tough decisions, on-the-job stress or just need to talk to someone who understands, RAP is here to help. We are your confidential resource, free for the asking. We can also help you develop personal skills to complement your medical knowledge. Our caring professionals are just a phone call away.

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hospital, which could potentially lose its accreditation.

So how do you stand your ground, and do what you know is ethically sound, without putting yourself in a difficult or even dangerous situation?

Review Contract and Schedules

Your contract is essential, because if certain terms are being ignored you can refer to it for support. It's easier when everything is on your side, says Amesh Adalja, M.D., Associate, Center for Biosecurity of University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Critical Care Medicine. “Read your contract so you're aware of violations and consequences of breaching. Even when you want to work extra hours, you need to abide by your contract and realize why these rules are in place. If you have been working too many hours, you may not be the best person to perform a

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Money Matters

Your Most Valuable Asset

If you are young and healthy, you might think your chances of becoming disabled are fairly slim. You wouldn't be alone in your belief: 64% of workers believe they have only a 2% or less risk of a disability lasting three months or longer.

Yet statistics tell us that 43% of 40-year-olds will suffer at least one long-term disability (90 days or longer) before age 65. Despite this risk, 38% of working Americans say they would be able to pay their living expenses for only three months or less if their incomes were interrupted; 65% would not be able to cover expenses for one year. These findings become all the more alarming when you consider that the average long-term disability lasts for two and a half years. If you wouldn't think of going without insurance coverage for your home, health, or car, it doesn't make much sense not to protect what may be your most valuable asset: your ability to earn an income.

An individual disability income insurance policy can help replace a percentage of your salary, up to the policy limits, if you should suffer an illness or injury that makes it impossible for you to continue working. The benefits can continue until you recover or for a predetermined number of years, whichever comes first. If you pay the premiums yourself, the benefits usually are not taxable. Some policies will pay if you can't perform your current occupation, whereas others will pay only if you cannot perform any type of job.

The appropriate disability income strategy may help reduce the financial consequences if you lose your income because of an illness or injury, and help you .

To learn more, contact Muniz & Associates at 813-258-0033.

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Standing Your Ground on Ethical Issues *continued*

procedure.”

Residents should think of themselves as colleagues and not subordinates, Dr. Adalja says. “You have your own values and priorities to defend. The mindset should be that you're part of the team, not an underling.”

Samuel Sandowski, M.D., Director of the Family Medicine Residency Program at South Nassau (N.Y.) Communities Hospital, advises residents to review their schedule when they first see it, and discuss any concerns with their supervisor *before* the hours are worked.

Many residents don't want to report violations because of the stigmatization that often occurs and because of the hospital accreditation-loss issue. Dr. Adalja says it may not progress to the reporting stage if you stand up at the beginning. But if that doesn't work, you should talk to the chief resident, then the resident program director. “Get it on the record,” he says. “They can offer assistance if they're given facts versus just hearing rumors of the situation.”

Know Where to Find the Answers

While underreporting work hours may be the most common ethical issue, it is certainly not the only one. There are other issues Dr. Sandowski sees, such as disagreements among family members on treatment or difficult end-of-life decisions. Residents can get caught in the middle of these issues, and he suggests enlisting the support of a supervisor or ethics committee.

The bigger question, Dr. Sandowski says, is how residents learn and practice ethics. “Six core competencies are taught during residency training, and one of them is professionalism. Ethics would fall under this competency. Attend lectures, workshops and discussions groups, and sit in on ethics committee meetings,” he says. “Residents are not expected to have all the answers, but you

Steps for Challenging Unethical Behavior

People who challenge unethical behavior need to be sure their criticisms appear credible and well-informed,” says M. Joy Hayes, Ph.D., an ethics consultant and founder/president of Courageous Ethics. To gain credibility and respect, she says residents should consider using this four-step process when challenging unethical behavior:

- Define the legal or ethical principles that are being compromised
 - Identify the possible consequences if the behavior continues
 - Affirm the barriers or challenges that lead to the unethical behavior
 - Suggest a pragmatic alternative that meets legal and ethical requirements
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