

Code of Medical Ethics

of the American Medical Association

Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs
Current Opinions with Annotations



Stewardship of the *Code of Medical Ethics*

Composed of seven practicing physicians, a resident and a medical student, the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs (CEJA) is the steward of the American Medical Association (AMA) *Code of Medical Ethics*. Each year, CEJA writes opinions on a wide variety of ethical and professional issues that members of the profession confront in their practice, research and teaching. These opinions, which are based on interpretations of the “Principles of Medical Ethics,” are developed through a deliberative process and become part of the *Code* upon adoption by the AMA House of Delegates. Through this continual refinement, the *Code* serves as a contemporary guide for physicians who strive to practice ethically.

Q and A

Is it appropriate to withhold medical information from a patient, especially in an emergency situation or when the patient is not medically sound?

Response based on the *Code of Medical Ethics*:

- Physicians should never withhold information from their patients. In emergency situations or when communication with the patient is not feasible, information can be delayed. However, it must be disclosed as soon as the patient is able to make an informed choice about whether he or she wants to receive this information.
- Physicians should establish a preferred method of disclosure with their patients before information becomes available and follow the patient's preference regarding what should be disclosed and to whom—the patient, a designated caregiver or family member.
- Physicians should disclose medical information in a sensitive and respectful manner, and should assess the amount of information the patient is able to receive at a given time.

Due to an increase in tuberculosis cases in a heavily populated Latino community, many patients have been placed in isolation or quarantined. Local Latino community leaders have recently cited discrimination and violation of patients' personal liberties. What can a physician tell the public, media and Latino members of the hospital staff about the importance of quarantine and isolation?

Response based on the *Code of Medical Ethics*:

- In times of possible epidemics, physicians have an ethical responsibility to protect the health of the general public. When quarantines and isolations are necessary, they are based on valid science and do not arbitrarily apply to a particular racial, socioeconomic or ethnic group.
- Physicians seek an appropriate balance between public need and individual restraint so that quarantine and isolation employ the least restrictive measures to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.
- Information about a patient's quarantine or isolation is kept confidential and reported only to the proper public health authorities.

A prospective patient e-mailed me asking for advice on her medications. Is it appropriate to respond by e-mail?

Response based on the *Code of Medical Ethics*:

- E-mail correspondence should not be used with new or prospective patients with whom no personal contact has been established. It may be used to supplement other, more personal encounters with established patients.
- Physicians should obtain permission from established patients prior to engaging in e-mail communication with them.
- All e-mail communication should include notification of the potential for breaches of privacy and confidentiality, difficulties validating the identity of parties involved and possible delays in responses.

Principles of Medical Ethics

*Revised and adopted by the AMA House of Delegates
(June 17, 2001)*

- I. A physician shall be dedicated to providing competent medical care, with compassion and respect for human dignity and rights.
- II. A physician shall uphold the standards of professionalism, be honest in all professional interactions, and strive to report physicians deficient in character or competence, or engaging in fraud or deception, to appropriate entities.
- III. A physician shall respect the law and also 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, colleagues, and other health professionals, and shall safeguard patient confidences and privacy within the constraints of the law.

- V. A physician shall continue to study, apply, and advance scientific knowledge, maintain a commitment to medical education, make relevant information available to patients, colleagues, and the public, obtain consultation, and use the talents 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 care.
- VII. A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to the improvement of the community and the betterment of public health.
- VIII. A physician shall, while caring for a patient, regard responsibility to the patient as paramount.
- IX. A physician shall support access to medical care for all people.

History of the *Code of Medical Ethics*

The AMA was founded in 1847 with the primary goals of establishing a code of ethics for the profession and setting standards for the education and training of physicians. The AMA *Code of Medical Ethics*, the world's first national code of professional ethics, continues to be the embodiment of professional self-regulation essential to the practice of good medicine. The current *Code* includes the “Principles of Medical Ethics,” which are not laws but standards of conduct that define honorable behavior for physicians. These principles form the basis for the opinions in the *Code*, widely considered the most comprehensive ethics guide for physicians.

Visit www.ama-assn.org/go/ceja for more information on the AMA Code of Medical Ethics.