

DEFINING ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

The American Board of Urology is committed to the principle that patient welfare is preeminent. This principle assumes a responsibility to the patient that transcends personal gain and engenders both individual patient and public trust. It is the cornerstone of the ethical and moral framework by which the physician is bound.

The physician-patient relationship, however, is part of a more complex social network. It also includes relationships within the profession and society as a whole. A variety of societal forces conflict with physicians' responsibility to their patients and the public. Rapidly advancing technologies, relationships with commercial entities, increased demands for documentation, rising health care costs, declining reimbursement, and increasing patient autonomy contribute to potential compromise of patient welfare. Urologists, in particular, are faced with technological advances that require new training and opportunity for entrepreneurialism. From this perspective medicine is viewed as a specialized personal service that ignores public responsibility and belies the trust instilled in the physician

As a consequence, there has been a call for a renewed commitment to professionalism. A number of organizations have attempted the development of a code of ethics and professionalism. They set forth principles and responsibilities the physician can review for guidance when confronting an ethical dilemma. In these documents, a number of qualities or virtues are repeatedly espoused. Among them are; justice, honesty, competence, impartiality, preservation of patient confidentiality, patient autonomy, and unbiased medical care. To address this need, representatives from the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation, the European Federation of Internal Medicine and the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine collaborated on the Medical Professionalism Project which was charged with developing a charter that provides a basic set of tenets for ethical and professional behavior.¹ The group intended to create a document applicable to medical and surgical specialties, healthcare systems, and cultures. They set forth three Fundamental Principles and a set of ten core commitments that serve to guide the professional and ethical conduct of physicians.

Although this Charter has met with widespread enthusiasm, it has not been uniformly endorsed by all physician groups; indeed it has been criticized for emphasizing a duty-based ethic (that is, duty to those around us), rather than a virtue-based ethic (which focuses on individual traits of human character).² Likewise, some have objected to the emphasis on achieving "competence" rather than encouraging excellence, and to the contractual tone of the document that implies an inherent basis of mistrust.³ While these criticisms may be valid, the document serves as a starting point for a conversation about professional responsibility and provides a framework for moral, ethical and professional conduct. The American Board of Urology endorses the Physician Charter and encourages and expects the urologic community will uphold the commitments which support the fundamental principles set forth by the document.

References

1. Medical professionalism in the new millennium: A physician charter. *Ann Int Med*, 136: 243-246, 2002.
2. Doukas DJ: Where is the virtue in professionalism? *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 12: 147-154, 2003.
3. Swick H, Bryan CS, Longo LD: Beyond the Physician Charter. Reflections on medical professionalism. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 49: 263-275, 2006.