



Medical Professionalism

Introduction

In 2002, the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation, the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine Foundation, and the European Federation of Internal Medicine developed a Charter on Medical Professionalism, and published it simultaneously in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* and *The Lancet*.¹ The Charter on Medical Professionalism is designed to reaffirm the medical profession's commitment to patients and to the health care system by setting forth fundamental and universal principles of medical professionalism.

The Washington Medical Commission (WMC) largely adopts the Charter on Medical Professionalism (Charter), as guidance for Washington physicians and physician assistants in fulfilling their professional responsibilities to their patients and to the public.²

Charter on Medical Professionalism

Preamble

Professionalism is the basis of medicine's contract with society. Professionalism demands placing the best interests of patients above those of the practitioner³, setting and maintaining standards of competence and integrity, and providing scientifically accurate advice to society on matters of health. The principles and responsibilities of medical professionalism must be clearly understood by both the profession and the public. Public trust in practitioners depends on the integrity of both individual practitioners and the profession as a whole.

At present, the medical profession is confronted by an explosion of technology, evolving practice conditions, and heightened regulatory obligations. As a result, practitioners find it increasingly difficult to meet their responsibilities to patients and society. In these circumstances, reaffirming the fundamental and universal principles and values of medical professionalism, which remain ideals to be pursued by all practitioners, becomes all the more important.

The medical profession everywhere is embedded in diverse cultures and national traditions, but its members share the role of healer, which has roots extending back to Hippocrates. Indeed, the medical profession must contend with complicated political, legal, and market forces. Moreover, there are wide variations in medical delivery and practice through which any general principles may be expressed in both complex and subtle

¹ "Medical Professionalism in the New Millennium: A Practitioner Charter." *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 2002;136(3):243-246, available at <http://annals.org/aim/article/474090/medical-professionalism-new-millennium-practitioner-charter>

² This Guidance Document is not identical to the previous Charter on Medical Professionalism. The WMC has edited that previous document in order to conform to state laws and rules. For example, in many places in this document, the WMC has replaced the word "shall" with the word "should," so as not to create mandates outside of the rule-making process.

³ In this guidance document, the WMC uses the term "practitioner" to refer to both allopathic physicians and physician assistants.

ways. Despite these differences, common themes emerge and form the basis of this Charter in the form of three fundamental principles, and as a set of definitive professional responsibilities.

Fundamental Principles

1. *Principle of primacy of patient welfare.* This principle is based on a dedication to serving the interest of the patient. Altruism contributes to the trust that is central to the practitioner–patient relationship. Market forces, societal pressures, and administrative exigencies must not compromise this principle.
2. *Principle of patient autonomy.* Practitioners should respect patient autonomy. Practitioners should be honest with their patients and empower them to make informed decisions about their treatment. Patients' decisions about their care must be paramount, as long as those decisions are in keeping with ethical principles and do not lead to demands for inappropriate care.
3. *Principle of social justice.* The medical profession should promote justice in the health care system, including the fair distribution of health care resources. Practitioners should work actively to eliminate discrimination in health care, whether based on race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or any other social category.

A Set of Professional Responsibilities

Commitment to professional competence. Practitioners should be committed to lifelong learning and to maintaining the medical knowledge and clinical and team skills necessary to deliver quality care. More broadly, the profession as a whole must strive to see that all of its members are competent⁴ and must ensure that appropriate mechanisms are available for the profession to accomplish this goal.

Commitment to honesty with patients. Practitioners should ensure that patients are adequately and honestly informed before the patient has consented to treatment, and also after treatment has occurred. This expectation does not mean that patients should be involved in every minute decision about medical care; rather, they must be empowered to decide on their course of therapy. Practitioners should acknowledge that in health care, medical errors that injure patients do sometimes occur. Whenever patients are injured as a consequence of medical care, patients should be informed promptly because failure to do so seriously compromises patient and societal trust. Reporting and analyzing medical mistakes provide opportunities to develop and apply appropriate risk management strategies that should improve patient care, not only for patients who have been injured but also to prevent future harm moving forward.

Commitment to patient confidentiality. Earning the trust and confidence of patients requires that appropriate confidentiality safeguards be applied to prevent disclosure of patient information unless disclosure is legally necessary. This commitment extends to discussions with persons acting on a patient's behalf when obtaining a patient's own consent is not feasible. Fulfilling the commitment to confidentiality is more pressing now than

⁴ Professional competence refers to “the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served.” Epstein RM, Hundert EM. Defining and assessing professional competence. *JAMA* 2002; 287(2):226-235, available at https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/194554?casa_token=nY5Pp29vutgAAAAA:fUtkGdzlVdqoe1p1T61lgKV1MYyhQNxUHoO4aEOxeZL21lchaFYoxgdHGC-nwjXoYNOJkhYTK9k6

ever given the increasing availability of genetic information and the widespread use of electronic information systems for compiling patient data. However, practitioners recognize that their commitment to patient confidentiality must occasionally yield to overriding legal requirements that protect public health and safety (for example, when patients endanger themselves or others).

Commitment to maintaining appropriate relations with patients. Given the inherent vulnerability and dependency of patients, certain relationships between practitioners and patients must be avoided. Practitioners should avoid exploiting patients for personal financial gain, or other private purpose. For example, state law prohibits practitioners from engaging in sexual or romantic relationships with current patients. This includes behaviors such as soliciting a date or kissing a patient in a romantic or sexual manner.⁵ State law also prohibits romantic or sexual relationships with former patients if the practitioner uses or exploits the trust, knowledge, influence or emotions derived from the professional relationship, or uses or exploits privileged information to meet the practitioner's personal or sexual needs.⁶ Practitioners should also abide by any ethical restrictions regarding romantic or sexual relationships with former patients that are applicable to their specialties.⁷

Commitment to improving quality of care. Practitioners should be dedicated to continuous improvement in the quality of health care. This commitment entails not only maintaining clinical competence but also working collaboratively with other professionals to reduce medical error, increase patient safety, minimize overuse of health care resources, and optimize the outcomes of care. Practitioners should actively participate in the development and application of better quality of care measures to assess routinely the performance of all individuals, institutions, and systems responsible for health care delivery. Practitioners, both individually and through their professional associations, should take responsibility for assisting in the creation and implementation of mechanisms designed to encourage continuous improvement in the quality of care.

Commitment to improving access to care. Medical professionalism demands that the objective of all health care systems is the availability of a reasonable and adequate standard of care that is accessible to all patients. Practitioners should individually and collectively strive to reduce barriers to equitable health care. Within each system, the practitioner should help eliminate barriers to access which are often based on education, laws, finances, geography, and social discrimination. A commitment to equity entails the promotion of public health and preventive medicine without concern for the self-interest of the practitioner or the profession.

Commitment to a just distribution of finite resources. While treating individual patients, practitioners should provide health care that is based on the standard of care which considers cost-effective management and limited resources. When medically necessary resources are scarce, such as during a pandemic, practitioners are encouraged to follow guidance from the Washington State Department of Health and local health departments to prioritize the needs of the public when there are not enough resources for all patients. Otherwise, practitioners should be committed to working with other practitioners, hospitals, and payers to develop and implement guidelines focused on the delivery of cost-effective care. While a practitioner, at times, may be tempted to "overtest" and "overtreat" to decrease their risk of medical malpractice claims, the

⁵ WAC 246-919-630, 246-918-410. See also RCW 18.130.180(24).

⁶ WAC 246-919-630(3). For additional guidance, see the WMC Guidance Document on "Sexual Misconduct and Abuse," GUI2017-03.

⁷ For example, the American Psychiatric Association takes the position that sexual activity with a current or former patient is unethical. American Psychiatric Association: The principles of medical ethics (with annotations especially applicable to psychiatry), section 2. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013. <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/ethics>. Accessed May 7, 2019.

practitioner's professional responsibility involving appropriate resource allocation requires scrupulous avoidance of superfluous tests and procedures. Providing unnecessary services not only exposes patients to avoidable harm and expense but also diminishes the resources available for others.

Commitment to scientific knowledge. Much of medicine's contract with society is based on integrity and the appropriate use of scientific knowledge, technology, and evidence-based medicine. Practitioners should uphold scientific standards, to promote research, and to create new knowledge and ensure its appropriate use. The profession is responsible for the integrity of this knowledge, which is based on scientific evidence, practitioner experience, and effective communication.

Commitment to maintaining trust by managing conflicts of interest. Medical professionals and their organizations have many opportunities to compromise their professional responsibilities by pursuing private gain or personal advantage. Such compromises are especially threatening in the pursuit of personal or organizational interactions with for-profit industries, including pharmaceuticals, laboratory services, medical equipment, and insurance companies. Practitioners should recognize, disclose to the public, and deal with conflicts of interest that arise in the course of their professional duties and activities. Relationships between industry and opinion leaders should be disclosed, especially when the latter determines the criteria for conducting and reporting clinical trials, writing editorials or therapeutic guidelines, or serving as editors of scientific journals.

Commitment to professional responsibilities. As members of a profession, practitioners are expected to work collaboratively to maximize patient care, be respectful of one another, and participate in the processes of self-regulation, including remediation and discipline of members who have failed to meet professional standards. The profession should define and organize the educational and standard-setting process for current and future members. Practitioners have both individual and collective obligations to participate in these processes. These obligations include engaging in internal assessment, offering constructive feedback to peers, and accepting external scrutiny of all aspects of their professional performance. Part of professionalism is being aware of conscious and unconscious bias. Practitioners are obligated to treat everyone with compassion, equity, and respect. Practitioners also have a professional responsibility to maintain their own health and well-being as well as to take appropriate action when a colleague may be impaired. Health issues should be addressed proactively to promote safe, effective, and compassionate care. In the absence of patient harm, concerns for impairment should be addressed through supportive, non-disciplinary pathways such as the Washington Physicians Health Program.

Summary

The practice of medicine in the modern era faces unprecedented challenges in virtually all cultures within our society. These challenges center on disparities in our health care system, an inability to meet the legitimate needs of patients due to insufficient resources, the increasing dependence on market forces to transform health care systems, and the temptation for practitioners to forsake their traditional commitment to the primacy of patient interests for their own personal gain. To maintain the fidelity of medicine's social contract, the WMC believes that practitioners must reaffirm their active dedication to the principles of professionalism, which entails not only their personal commitment to the welfare of their patients but also collective efforts to improve our health care system for the welfare of society. The WMC adopts this Charter on Medical Professionalism to encourage such dedication among practitioners and the profession in general, and to assure the public that the WMC upholds ideals of professionalism in the State of Washington.

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