

## 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*. The Charter on Medical Professionalism (Charter) 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 Medical Quality Assurance Commission adopts the Charter on Medical Professionalism as a guideline for Washington physicians and physician assistants in fulfilling their professional responsibilities to their patients and to the public.<sup>1</sup> In this guideline, the Commission uses the term "practitioner" to refer to both allopathic physicians and physician assistants.

### Charter on Medical Professionalism

#### Preamble

Professionalism is the basis of medicine's contract with society. It demands placing the interests of patients above those of the practitioner, setting and maintaining standards of competence and integrity, and providing expert advice to society on matters of health. The principles and responsibilities of medical professionalism must be clearly understood by both the profession and society. Essential to this contract is public trust in practitioners, which depends on the integrity of both individual practitioners and the whole profession.

At present, the medical profession is confronted by an explosion of technology, changing market forces, problems in health care delivery, bioterrorism, and globalization. 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

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<sup>1</sup> This Guideline is not identical to the Charter on Medical Professionalism. The Commission has edited it in order to conform to state laws and rules. For example, in many places in this document, the Commission has replaced the word "shall" with the word "should," so as not to create mandates outside the rule-making process.

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

*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.

*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 practice and do not lead to demands for inappropriate care.

*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, 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 be responsible for maintaining the medical knowledge and clinical and team skills necessary for the provision of quality care. More broadly, the profession as a whole must strive to see that all of its members are competent, and must ensure that appropriate mechanisms are available for practitioners to accomplish this goal.

*Commitment to honesty with patients.* Practitioners should ensure that patients are completely and honestly informed before the patient has consented to treatment and 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 the course of therapy. Practitioners should also 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 the basis for appropriate prevention and improvement strategies and for appropriate compensation to injured parties.

*Commitment to patient confidentiality.* Earning the trust and confidence of patients requires that appropriate confidentiality safeguards be applied to disclosure of patient information. This commitment extends to discussions with persons acting on a patient's behalf when obtaining the patient's own consent is not feasible. Fulfilling the commitment to confidentiality is more pressing now than ever before, given the widespread use of electronic information systems for compiling patient data and an increasing availability of genetic information. Practitioners recognize, however, that their commitment to patient confidentiality must occasionally yield to overriding considerations in the public interest (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. In particular, state law prohibits practitioners from engaging in sexual misconduct, which is defined in rule and

includes soliciting a date or kissing a patient in a romantic or sexual manner among its prohibited activities.<sup>2</sup> Practitioners should also avoid exploiting patients for personal financial gain, or other private purpose.

*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 of better measures of quality of care and the application of quality 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, must 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 be the availability of a uniform and adequate standard of care. Practitioners should individually and collectively strive to reduce barriers to equitable health care. Within each system, the practitioner should work to eliminate barriers to access 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 meeting the needs of individual patients, practitioners should provide health care that is based on the wise and cost-effective management of limited clinical resources. They should be committed to working with other practitioners, hospitals, and payers to develop guidelines for cost-effective care. The practitioner's professional responsibility for appropriate allocation of resources requires scrupulous avoidance of superfluous tests and procedures. The provision of unnecessary services not only exposes one's 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 the integrity and appropriate use of scientific knowledge and technology. 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 and practitioner experience.

*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 medical equipment manufacturers, insurance companies, and pharmaceutical firms. Practitioners should recognize, disclose to the general 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

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<sup>2</sup> WAC 246-919-630, 246-918-410. See also RCW 18.130.180(24).

self-regulation, including remediation and discipline of members who have failed to meet professional standards. The profession should also 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 and accepting external scrutiny of all aspects of their professional performance.

## Summary

The practice of medicine in the modern era faces unprecedented challenges in virtually all cultures and societies. These challenges center on increasing disparities among the legitimate needs of patients, the available resources to meet those needs, 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 patients' interests. To maintain the fidelity of medicine's social contract during this turbulent time, the Commission 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 the health care system for the welfare of society. The Commission adopts this Charter on Medical Professionalism to encourage such dedication and to promote an action agenda for the profession of medicine that is universal in scope and purpose.

## References

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

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