

Being a Health Professional Activist

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Overview

- [Relational organizing](#): process by which individuals harness their personal and professional relationships to engage in interpersonal communication with the goal of effecting community change
- [Activist](#): a person who uses or advocates for strong action to oppose or support a controversial cause
- Many health professionals are activists in their personal lives but struggle to incorporate activism into the workplace or worry about violating codes of ethics
- Thoughtful, respectful activism can have a place in professional healthcare settings
- Activism and/or self-disclosure may raise ethical concerns, so practitioners should carefully consider their obligations to patients before engaging

Objectives for Activism in the Workplace

- Genuinely connect with patients, rather than making everything political
- Exercise judgment when deciding whether or not to share your beliefs
- Have conversations that are powerful yet respectful
- Aim to promote population health and address social justice concerns
- Embrace your role as a trusted healer with medical charisma; practice empathy by listening intently, avoiding repetitive scripts, sending a physical note, etc.

Case Studies in Medical Ethics

1. [“Fear”](#)
 - Dr. Walden meets with an adult female patient who wants to get off of her SSRI and have her anxiety and depression “resolved” so that she can get a concealed carry permit.
2. [“No One Ever Asked”](#)
 - Dr. Minor, a white female, meets with a patient who is an adult black male. He has been seeing this doctor for three years and has hypertension and diabetes. The check-up occurs one week after the murder of George Floyd.

Health and Politics

- Many medical schools include courses on activism and social justice
- Following George Floyd's death, the American Medical Association (AMA) set a precedent for healthcare advocacy by releasing a statement on the importance of addressing the root causes of inequity, as well as disproportionate impacts of police brutality and COVID-19 on people of color
- Contentiousness of healthcare professionals as activists:
 - In 2011, Wisconsin doctors were not allowed to take time off from work to politically protest
 - Ford Vox, MD poses concerns:
 - Individual physicians represent an entire profession
 - Potential undermining of the sacred doctor-patient relationship
 - Code of ethics: it would be "out of bounds" for a physician to promote their own mission in a way that compromises patient care

Health Professional Activism

- Our society accepts that healthcare workers may practice activism outside of work, through activities like:
 - voting
 - staying informed
 - protesting (not during work time)
 - using social media to promote civic engagement
 - talking about values / civic engagement with friends and families
 - donating money
- Activism within the healthcare workplace is less typical, and happens between:
 - the individual and staff
 - the individual and patients

The American Medical Association (AMA) on Activism

- [AMA Code of Medical Ethics opinions](#) acknowledge that physicians are moral agents and state that their conscience plays an important role in the overall integrity of healthcare
 - When following conscience, physicians must:
 - not discriminate against or unduly burden patients
 - uphold standards of informed consent by letting patients know all of their options (not just the ones you morally approve of)

- guide patients to unbiased sources that will help them access the services they need
- In general, the [AMA](#) encourages physicians to advocate, as long as patient care isn't disrupted
 - Acknowledges that, in rare contexts, institutions should let medical students miss class to protest / physicians should be allowed to be absent from work to protest
 - Advises that physicians do not initiate political conversation
- When talking about politics with a patient or a patient's family, physicians should:
 - judge the "intrusiveness of discussion and the patient's level of comfort"
 - only bring up politics in contexts where it's appropriate to talk about social / civic / recreational things
 - don't talk politics with a patient who is "emotionally pressured by significant medical circumstances"
 - encourage and advocate for beneficial reform and administration of healthcare laws
 - stay current on potential policies that would improve healthcare access, healthcare quality, medical research, and public health

Balancing Code of Ethics with Other Factors

- Physicians should further investigate the AMA's Code of Medical Ethics and also ethical considerations for their specialty
- Consider relevant institutional rules

Case Study Outcomes

- [Case 1](#): Dr. Walden resolved the patient's diagnosis, removed her medications, and let her leave; she never returned. In hindsight, Dr. Walden wishes that he'd had an open, non-judgmental conversation with the patient about her fears
 - Was it in the patient's wellbeing to stop treating her anxiety and depression?
- [Case 2](#): At the end of the appointment, Dr. Minor asked her patient how he's been doing, and how she could support him. He cried and thanked her, saying that no one had asked. Some things to consider:
 - Did the conversation help the patient? We don't get to hear his narrative
 - Was this an appropriate time / place to ask?
 - Dr. Minor was probably trying to express genuine support / fight white silence, but some patients of color might not want their white doctor bringing this up

- It could have been appropriate to ask the patient's permission to discuss how they've been impacted by George Floyd's death and the media's current focus on systemic racism in America

Takeaways

- If a practitioner thinks it would be beneficial to share personal narrative, it usually is
- Advocate away in your personal time! In the workplace, refer to your codes of ethics
- Keep your message positive and respect patients' and colleagues' comfort levels