



MEDICAL ETHICS WITHOUT THE RHETORIC

Cases presented here involve real physicians and patients. Unlike the cases in medical ethics textbooks, these cases seldom involve human cloning, bizarre treatments, or stem cell research. We review cases more common to the practice of medicine.

Most cases are circumstantially unique and require the viewpoints of the practitioners and patients involved. For this reason, I solicit your input on the cases discussed here at council@aol.com. Reader perspectives along with my own viewpoint are published in the issue following each case presentation. We are also interested in cases submitted by readers. The following case addresses an ethical issue that arises when a physician has another physician as a patient.



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CASE FIFTEEN - SHAKY GROUNDS

Your patient is a highly regarded surgeon who is a member of the same medical staff to which you belong. She complains that she is occasionally bothered by shaky hands and blacked out for just a second once during surgery. You think she smells of alcohol and that alcohol abuse is probably the problem. When you raise this issue, she flatly denies having alcohol problems and insists that it is some sort of neurological problem. You are skeptical but agree to run some tests on the slight chance she is right. When you see her a week later, you report that all the tests have come back negative. You can see no other cause of her problem except alcohol or drugs. You discretely ask about her at the hospital, but no one has noticed anything but excellent performance from her. Your concern is that a patient could be seriously injured if she blacks out or has an attack of the shakes during surgery. You wonder if you have an obligation to report your concern to the medical staff or hospital administration. You are also concerned about maintaining patient privacy. Additionally, if you report the surgeon, others having substance abuse issues may be unlikely to seek medical attention.

This is an actual case. Of course, there are any number of complicating circumstances and additional details; but please address the case on the basis of the information provided.

There will be an analysis of this case and a new case in the next issue.

Your input is requested. Email your responses to: council@aol.com.

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