

PROFESSIONALISM

Medicine as an Ethical Profession

Brian H. Childs, Ph.D.

Professor of Bioethics and Professionalism

What follows is an outline defining the issues. The outline will come to life if you apply the basic principles to actual cases and in the actions, attitudes, and virtues as demonstrated, or not, by your mentors, teachers, and colleagues.

1. A profession, specifically medicine, relies on a social contract or more profoundly a **covenant**. The profession of medicine is a vocation which is granted significant authority given in exchange for a valuable service.
 - a. The **authority that is granted** to those who practice the profession is
 - i. Society is expected to follow its requirements for healing and/or care and well being
 - ii. Autonomy to determine who should be recognized as practicing the profession through training, determining competence to practice, and limit nonprofessional competition through licensing.
 - iii. Privileges are given such as status, respect, and a reasonable income
2. There are three ethical obligations required of the medical profession
 - a. Attain and **maintain scientific and clinical competence**
 - i. This obligation is fulfilled by the physician's maintaining the virtue of **integrity**: maintaining the standards of intellectual and moral excellence in medical education, research, and ultimately patient care
 - b. Assuring that the **promotion and protection of the patient's health interests** is the physicians primary interest by keeping self-interest secondary
 - i. This obligation is fulfilled by the physician's maintaining the virtue of **humility**: the physician is aware of persons (not just as organ systems or symptoms) and that persons may have critical differences in country of origin, language, social status, race, religion, sex, gender, political

- affiliation, etc. when those differences are clinically relevant and to not let those differences create a bias in clinical judgement
- ii. This obligation requires that the physician protect the privacy of the patient by maintaining confidentiality unless there are legal requirements such as a duty to warn and child or elder abuse
 - c. Maintain medicine as a **public trust for the current and future benefit of patients**. Medicine is a public profession and not a guild that protects the interest of the profession alone.
 - i. This obligation is fulfilled when the physician maintains the virtue of **being a fiduciary** by following professional ethics and professional norms. A professional relationship is not a contractual one between equals. The professional has power over the individual so therefore has an obligation to protect the individual by fulfilling the requirements of integrity and humility.
 3. The capstone of the medical profession is **compassion**.
 - a. The physician's fulfillment of the **covenant** is expressed as the ethical obligation to recognize when a patient is experiencing distress or pain or suffering (both physical and emotional) and to prevent or ameliorate them with sound clinical management.
 - i. Physicians **do not** participate in executions
 - ii. Physicians **do not** participate in torture
 - iii. Physicians **do not** keep secret connections for pay with medical products industries nor have obvious conflicts of interests that may compromise sound medical care or violate the physician obligation of being the patient **fiduciary**

Resource: Laurence B. McCullough. *Historical Dictionary of Medical Ethics* (2018)

Howard Brody. *The Healer's Power* (1992)

AMA Code of Ethics