Medical Profession Responsibilities

Ethics is one of the few cornerstones that differentiate the medical profession from many other industries. Liability, regulatory compliance, and overall quality are often driven by the implementation of strict ethics by medical personnel. There are many scenarios in which ethics play an important role. The key to ensuring strict adherence is to understand the reasons for these standards. Once fully understood, strong ethics can guide one through work and through life.

The Role of Ethics in the Medical Environment

There are many fields in which sensitive information is transferred between two or more entities. While industries such as information technology, Wall Street, and others thrive on the strategic use of important information, these industries are not charged with the moral responsibility of safeguarding personal and sensitive health information of the public. The medical field is highly diverse and serves hundreds of millions of patients each year. Health care professionals maintain highly sensitive personal information (illustrating many potential diseases and illnesses) that can be used to unfairly demean or discriminate against others. To ensure that personal health information is properly safeguarded, the Federal government, along with individual states, has created regulations that guarantee patients the right to privacy. Maintaining confidentiality is just one of many challenges that medical workers face. It is, however, one of the most frequent. It is important to remember that one cannot always control how information is given to him or her, but one can be accountable for how he or she uses the information.

An Example of Improper Disclosure

A photojournalist visited a hospital on a tip that a celebrity had been admitted after a serious motor vehicle accident. The reporter hoped to take photographs of the injured star and then sell them to a well-known tabloid. In order to ensure that he received accurate information and gain restricted access to the patient, the journalist paid a hospital worker $500. The next day, photos of the compromised celeb were published in a tabloid accompanying a story alleging alcohol and drug use before the accident.

After the story was published, the star sued the hospital, and a criminal investigation revealed the identity of the hospital worker who accepted the journalist's bribe. That individual was terminated, and criminal charges were also filed.
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In Hindsight

The hospital could have had a more strict policy regarding visitation and enforcement of its policies by staff. They might also have considered relocating the celebrity in a secure area within the hospital to further restrict access. The employee in question could have made the personal decision not to share confidential information with a party who was not in a "need to know" position. Finally, the hospital could have had a more severe discipline process for employees who willfully and knowingly improperly share confidential patient information.

Ethics Are Not Easy

The medical profession is a field burdened with many challenges. In addition to the technical proficiency of certain procedures, health care workers are entrusted with highly sensitive information about the patients they serve. Because of the importance of this issue, medical workers must be aware of the character and discipline involved in this field. Not just anyone can serve in this field. When regulations (or rules) are violated, it must be properly reported. Failure to uphold the law in this manner can lead to reduced trust by patients and reduced credibility for the entire health care industry. All health care workers, regardless of discipline or specialty, must fully understand their roles in maintaining a viable and ethical medical community.