

Disclosing Medical Mistakes: A Communication Management Plan for Physicians

[Letter]. Perm J 2013 Fall;17(4):94

<http://dx.doi.org/10.7812/TPP/13-088>

Re: Petronio S, Torke A, Bosslet G, Isenberg S, Wocial L, Helft PR. Disclosing medical mistakes: a communication management plan for physicians. *Perm J* 2013 Spring;17(2):73-79. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-106>

Dear Editor,

I was appalled to read the first words of this abstract: "There is a growing consensus that disclosure of medical mistakes is ethically and legally appropriate ..."

It has always been appropriate to acknowledge ones' mistakes as soon as discovered, even if the patient is unaware. Forget "the plan" and do not weigh the consequences, but simply say to all in the room: "It's my fault"; "I made a mistake"; "I caused the problem"; "I'm sorry, but let's see if we can fix it." The patient will appreciate your honesty, realizing that we all make mistakes. To balk, question, or deny the mistake is not only wrong but greatly increases the likelihood of legal action.

The first half of my 40-year otolaryngology career was spent in private practice, and the last half at the Kaiser Permanente Santa Clara Medical Center. I certainly made my share of mistakes, but by following this path, not once was I threatened with legal action. ❖

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Response to Dr Gaskill

Thank you for your response. We agree with Dr Gaskill that disclosure of medical mistakes has always been—and remains—the most ethically acceptable strategy. However, it has not always been the case that practitioners, risk managers, and health care administrators have been in favor of full and immediate disclosure. We appreciate Dr Gaskill's passionate advocacy of the ethical position of disclosure and for offering his opinion. ❖

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What Does Professionalism Mean to the Physician?

[Letter]. Perm J 2013 Fall;17(4):94

<http://dx.doi.org/10.7812/TPP/13-138>

Re: Kanter MH, Nguyen M, Klau MH, Spiegel NH, Ambrosini VL. What does professionalism mean to the physician? *Perm J* 2013 Summer;17(3):87-90. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-120>

Dear Editor,

Thank you for publishing the commentary "What Does Professionalism Mean to the Physician?" in the Summer 2013 issue of *The Permanente Journal*. I agree that the core principles of professionalism include excellence, accountability, altruism, humanitarianism, respect for others, honor, and integrity. I would like to suggest that "duty" be considered as an additional core principle of professionalism. One could argue that duty is already incorporated into the existing core principles of professionalism. However, as a separate core principle, duty would weave a deontologic thread into the fabric of professionalism.

According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, deontology is "the theory or study of moral obligation."¹ The root of the word, deon, is Greek, which means "duty," according to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.² By including a deontologic thread into the fabric of professionalism, it acknowledges that physicians are driven by a sense of duty to their patients, their organization, and their communities. In fact, when other core principles of professionalism have failed, it is often the principle of duty that the physician must depend upon in order to continue her or his work.

Once again, thank you for the excellent commentary. ❖

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References

1. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth edition. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc; 2000.
2. Zalta EN, editor. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford, CA: The Metaphysics Research Lab of Stanford University; 2012.

Response to Dr Ho

Dear Dr Ho,

We are pleased that you found our article an important commentary on professionalism. Our main purpose was to have physicians incorporate the ideals of professionalism into their daily work. There are other principles that could be listed under professionalism. "Duty" as it applies to caring for our patients is certainly an important concept and could be considered as a separate principle. We believe that it is part of accountability and altruism. Ultimately, our goal was to continue the dialogue on this topic. You have added insights to this important work. Thank you for your contribution. ❖

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