

Professionalism

Medical professionals avow publicly that they are competent and willing to care for the sick and that they will make this endeavor their way of life. All independent healthcare professionals (henceforth referred to inclusively as "doctors," and with appreciation that the ethos of professionalism extends to the entire healthcare team) affirm a commitment to moral goodness and to subordinating their self-interest to the patient's good. Professionalism in healthcare consists of inseparable technical and ethical aspects. For the Christian there is also a third imperative, which reinforces and enriches the meaning of the first two.

The Technical Aspect

The medical professional diagnoses health and sickness objectively, according to scientific criteria based, to the extent possible, on rational analysis of empirical data and provides care that is supported by valid and reliable evidence. The application of knowledge, experience, and clinical judgment to an individual patient is the discretionary skill or art of medicine.

Gaining competence in the science and art of medicine requires years of intensive, systematic, and intellectually rigorous study under the personal mentorship of experienced physicians or dentists in a broad range of specialties. Following entry into medical or dental practice, the pursuit of scholarly learning continues throughout the professional's lifetime as the doctor seeks continually to acquire new knowledge and improve upon the skills of application with ever-advancing technical competence.

The credentialed doctor serves under the aegis of a medical or dental community that trains and provides support throughout his or her professional career. This community gives medicine and dentistry their exclusive practice privileges and fiduciary identities in society by establishing binding standards of care and by maintaining vigilant self-assessment and self-correction. The subsidiary goals of medicine and dentistry include serving society through education and scientific knowledge advancement, and providing a living for their practitioners.

The Ethical Aspect

The doctor's decisions should arise from virtuous character in conformity with prudence in the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and justice. Medical and dental practice requires a life of discipline, integrity, self-giving, and self-effacement. Excellent care must always be given, even if there is personal cost or physical danger.

The doctor has the moral responsibility to respect the worth and dignity of patients, who at all times are his or her equals as persons. Moral equality mandates mutual respect; there must be trust and integrity of communication combined with cooperation in giving and receiving care. In medical practice, interventions and recommendations are chosen to accommodate the patient's perspective, as health is integrally related to the patient's life goals, needs, and personal values. All medical and dental care must respect the patient's personal needs and preferences without compromising sound medical judgment or violating the doctor's conscience (see statements on Healthcare Right of Conscience and Patient Refusal of Therapy).

The doctor cares for the individual patient from a position of expertise that must always be exercised for the patient's good. The primary goals of the doctor are to preserve and restore health, to comfort or relieve suffering, and always to care.

The doctor must be vigilant to avoid harm, whether that be adverse outcomes or the use of immoral means to desired ends. In diagnosing, counseling, prescribing, performing procedures, communicating, documenting, managing resources, and in all other matters, the doctor should act with caution and forethought, protecting the patient's health, safety and confidentiality.

The doctor should treat patients without favoritism or discrimination and endeavor to make healthcare available to the poor. The doctor has a stewardship responsibility to foster affordability and availability of care by applying medical or dental resources prudently (see statements on Healthcare Delivery and Allocating Resources).

The doctor should communicate respectfully with colleagues and team members, acknowledging the contributions of all.

The doctor's attitude must not be limited to the reductionist tendencies of science or economics but should strive for ever-increasing moral discernment and knowledge of life's higher meanings and obligations.

The Christian Aspect

In addition to the previous two aspects, which apply to all healthcare professionals, the Christian physician or dentist recognizes a third and transcendent aspect. The Christian doctor knows that the patient's dignity derives from having been created in the image of God. The Christian doctor appreciates and encourages a deeper meaning of health and illness in the context of the special value and eternal destiny of human life. Sickness and facing the inevitability of death may be used by God as avenues toward greater meaning and purpose in life. The Christian doctor knows that true wholeness consists not only of physical health and emotional well-being but ultimately in being in a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Christian doctor learns this spiritual perspective on reality through an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the study of God's self-revelation in the Scriptures and creation, fellowship within a Christian community, and prayerful reflection.

The Christian doctor knows that he or she is accountable to God for the care provided fellow human beings. The Christian doctor also recognizes that, despite one's best efforts and intentions, medical and dental care is sometimes imperfect or inadequate. Faith in Christ provides the doctor with humility, encouragement, and the inspiration to improve and persevere (see statement on A Christian Response to Adverse Outcomes Arising from Medical Error).

The Christian called to the practice of medicine or dentistry is given a ministry: humble service of others in a spirit of self-sacrificial love for all, including the neediest and the lowliest. The Christian's response to the calling to medicine or dentistry proves the doctor a faithful professional (see statement on Principles of Christian Excellence in Medical & Dental Practice).

*Approved by the House of Representative
Passed unanimously
April 24, 2014, Green Lakes, WI*