



AAPM Position Statement on the Pain Physicians' Responsibilities to Society

Background

Physicians have long recognized their responsibilities to individual patients. The importance of this ethical commitment was first expressed in the Hippocratic Oath, written more than 2,500 years ago: “Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick.”¹ It is also expressed in the World Medical Association’s *Declaration of Geneva*, adopted in 1948 after offensive lapses in medical ethics during World War II: “I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity; the health of my patient will be my first consideration.”² Although medical ethics does not require limitless sacrifice from physicians, some physicians have shown exemplary virtue in caring for their patients, even when doing so has exposed them to personal risk and required personal sacrifice. Exemplary physicians are often the physicians who exceed their duties to patients, treating patients humanely and serving as advocates of their needs and interests.

Ethical Tenets:

Human health does not depend only on treatment by physicians. Social and political circumstances profoundly influence the health and well-being of all people. It is not enough to care for individual patients if the causes of their ill health are rooted in harmful social practices and unjust political arrangements.³ Access and equity in social and political matters directly affect human health. For example, health is directly affected by access to adequate food, clean water, and safe housing. It is also directly affected by protection from chemical toxins and political disturbances.

The adequacy of social responses to natural disasters also affects human health. Medical ethics has come to acknowledge the direct link between human health and the social environment. For that reason, medical ethics now acknowledges a responsibility on the part of physicians to protect health through social interventions.

In the United States, the AMA recognizes social responsibility for human health in this way: “A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to the improvement of the community and the betterment of public health.”⁴ Because physicians have different skills and expertise, they can meet this responsibility in a variety of ways, ranging from provision of direct care to the indigent to political advocacy. This social responsibility of physicians has been recognized as a core element of the AMA’s “Declaration of Professional Responsibility: Medicine’s Social Contract with Humanity,” adopted in 2001 (see Appendix B). Among other things, the declaration commits physicians to work toward the development of advances in medicine and public health. Specifically, the declaration commits physicians to educate people about threats to the health of humanity and to advocate for the social, economic, educational, and political changes necessary to relieve suffering and to advance human well-being.

Recommendations:

A number of social and political obstacles to improving the theory and practice of Pain Medicine currently exist. These include inadequate training and education in the management of pain, real and perceived barriers to the use of pain medications, and inadequate research in pain control. These obstacles directly affect the ability to treat patient suffering. Consequently, Pain Medicine physicians have a responsibility to educate the public about advances in Pain Medicine and to work toward better medical education and training in Pain Medicine. Pain management physicians also have a responsibility to promote research in Pain Medicine and to help eliminate social prejudices and legal obstacles that interfere with the medical management of pain.

These responsibilities may be carried out in a variety of ways.

- Individual Pain Medicine physicians can educate the public about advances in Pain Medicine through teaching, writing, and lecturing on the subject.
- Success in leading regulatory and legal change in Pain Medicine will require concerted and organized efforts on the part of the profession as a whole. Groups will need to collaborate for the sake of society as a whole in order to optimize the health of patients in pain and eliminate the major public health problem of pain by advancing the practice and specialty of pain medicine.
- Members of the profession participate in reform of regulatory policy and practice and to ensure that safe practice guidelines for pain treatment are taken into account when legislators draft regulations and laws that apply to pain.
- To encourage collective action, professional organizations representing Pain Medicine physicians have a responsibility to regularly review the status of Pain Medicine and to advocate publicly for the changes in regulations and laws that compromise the ethical practice of Pain Medicine.

References

1. Miles S. *The Hippocratic Oath and the Ethics of Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2003.
2. Annas G, Grodin MA, eds. *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1995.
3. Walzer JL, Numbers R. *Sickness and Health in America: Readings in the History of Medicine and Public Health*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press; 1997.
4. *Code of Medical Ethics*, Principles of Medical Ethics:xiv.

Appendix B. American Medical Association Declaration of Professional Responsibility

Preamble

Never in the history of human civilization has the well-being of each individual been so inextricably linked to that of every other. Plagues and pandemics respect no national borders in a world of global commerce and travel. Wars and acts of terrorism enlist innocents as combatants and mark civilians as targets. Advances in medical science and genetics, while promising great good, may also be harnessed as agents of evil. The unprecedented scope and immediacy of these universal challenges demand concerted action and response by all.

As physicians, we are bound in our response by a common heritage of caring for the sick and the suffering. Through the centuries, individual physicians have fulfilled this obligation by applying their skills and knowledge competently, selflessly, and at times heroically. Today, our profession must reaffirm its historical commitment to combat natural and man-made assaults on the health and well-being of humankind. Only by acting together across geographic and ideological divides can we overcome such powerful threats. Humanity is our patient.

Declaration

We, the members of the world community of physicians, solemnly commit ourselves to:

1. Respect human life and the dignity of every individual.
2. Refrain from supporting or committing crimes against humanity and condemn all such acts.
3. Treat the sick and injured with competence and compassion and without prejudice.
4. Apply our knowledge and skills when needed, though doing so may put us at risk.
5. Protect the privacy and confidentiality of those for whom we care and breach that confidence only when keeping it would seriously threaten their health and safety or that of others.
6. Work freely with colleagues to discover, develop, and promote advances in medicine and public health that ameliorate suffering and contribute to human well-being.
7. Educate the public and polity about present and future threats to the health of humanity.
8. Advocate for social, economic, educational, and political changes that ameliorate suffering and contribute to human well-being.
9. Teach and mentor those who follow us, for they are the future of our caring profession.

We make these promises solemnly, freely, and upon our personal and professional honor.