

# Medical professionalism in the new millennium: a physicians' charter\*

## Medical Professionalism Project

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**ABSTRACT – The practice of medicine in the modern era is beset with unprecedented challenges in virtually all cultures and societies. These challenges centre on increasing disparities between the legitimate needs of patients, the available resources to meet those needs, the increasing dependence on market forces to transform healthcare systems, and the temptation for physicians to forsake their traditional commitment to the primacy of patients' interests. To maintain the fidelity of medicine's social contract during this turbulent time, we believe that physicians must reaffirm their active dedication to the principles of professionalism, which entails not only their personal commitment to the welfare of their patients but also collective efforts to improve the healthcare system for the welfare of society. This Charter on Medical Professionalism is intended to encourage such dedication and to promote an action agenda for the profession of medicine that is universal in scope and purpose.**

Physicians today are experiencing frustration as changes in the healthcare delivery systems in virtually all industrialised countries threaten the very nature and values of medical professionalism. Meetings among the European Federation of Internal Medicine, the American College of Physicians and the American Society of Internal Medicine (ACP-ASIM), and the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) have confirmed that physicians' views on professionalism are similar in quite diverse systems of healthcare delivery. We share the view that medicine's commitment to the patient is being challenged by external forces of change within our societies.

Recently, voices from many countries have begun calling for a renewed sense of professionalism, one that is activist in reforming healthcare systems. Responding to this challenge, the European Federation of Internal Medicine, the ACP-ASIM Foundation and the ABIM Foundation combined efforts to launch the Medical Professionalism Project

in late 1999. These three organisations designated members to develop a 'charter' to encompass a set of principles to which all medical professionals can and should aspire. The charter supports physicians' efforts to ensure that the healthcare systems and the physicians working within them remain committed both to patient welfare and to the basic tenets of social justice. Moreover, the charter is intended to be applicable in different cultures and political systems.

### Preamble

Professionalism is the basis of medicine's contract with society. It demands placing the interests of patients above those of the physician, setting and maintaining standards of competence and integrity, and providing expert advice to society on matters of health. The principles and responsibilities of medical professionalism must be clearly understood by both the profession and society. Essential to this contract is public trust in physicians, which depends on the integrity of both individual physicians and the whole profession.

At present, the medical profession is confronted by an explosion of technology, changing market forces, problems in healthcare delivery, bioterrorism and globalisation. As a result, physicians find it increasingly difficult to meet their responsibilities to patients and society. In these circumstances, reaffirming the fundamental and universal principles and values of medical professionalism, which remain ideals to be pursued by all physicians, becomes all the more important.

The medical profession everywhere is embedded in diverse cultures and national traditions, but its members share the role of healer, which has roots extending back to Hippocrates. Indeed, the medical profession must contend with complicated political, legal and market forces. Moreover, there are wide variations in medical delivery and practice through which any general principles may be expressed in both complex and subtle ways. Despite these differences, common themes emerge and form

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the basis of this charter in the form of three fundamental principles and as a set of definitive professional responsibilities.

### Fundamental principles

- *Principle of primacy of patient welfare.*  
This principle is based on a dedication to serving the interest of the patient. Altruism contributes to the trust that is central to the physician–patient relationship. Market forces, societal pressures, and administrative exigencies must not compromise this principle.
- *Principle of patient autonomy.*  
Physicians must have respect for patient autonomy. Physicians must be honest with their patients and empower them to make informed decisions about their treatment. Patients' decisions about their care must be paramount, as long as those decisions are in keeping with ethical practice and do not lead to demands for inappropriate care.
- *Principle of social justice.*  
The medical profession must promote justice in the healthcare system, including the fair distribution of healthcare resources. Physicians should work actively to eliminate discrimination in healthcare whether based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or any other social category.

### A set of professional responsibilities

- *Commitment to professional competence.*  
Physicians must be committed to lifelong learning and be responsible for maintaining the medical knowledge and clinical and team skills necessary for the provision of quality care. More broadly, the profession as a whole must strive to see that all of its members are competent and must ensure that appropriate mechanisms are available for physicians to accomplish this goal.
- *Commitment to honesty with patients.*  
Physicians must ensure that patients are completely and honestly informed before the patient has consented to treatment and after treatment has occurred. This expectation does not mean that patients should be involved in every minute decision about medical care; rather, they must be empowered to decide on the course of therapy. Physicians should also acknowledge that in healthcare, medical errors that injure patients do sometimes occur. Whenever patients are injured as a consequence of medical care, patients should be informed promptly because failure to do so seriously compromises patient and societal trust. Reporting and analysing medical mistakes provide the basis for appropriate prevention and improvement strategies and for appropriate compensation to injured parties.
- *Commitment to patient confidentiality.*

Earning the trust and confidence of patients requires that appropriate confidentiality safeguards be applied to disclosure of patient information. This commitment extends to discussions with persons acting on a patient's behalf when obtaining the patient's own consent is not feasible. Fulfilling the commitment to confidentiality is more pressing now than ever before, given the widespread use of electronic information systems for compiling patient data and an increasing availability of genetic information. Physicians recognise, however, that their commitment to patient confidentiality must occasionally yield to overriding considerations in the public interest (for example, when patients endanger others).

- *Commitment to maintaining appropriate relations with patients.*  
Given the inherent vulnerability and dependency of patients, certain relationships between physicians and patients must be avoided. In particular, physicians should never exploit patients for any sexual advantage, personal financial gain, or other private purpose.
- *Commitment to improving quality of care.*  
Physicians must be dedicated to continuous improvement in the quality of healthcare. This commitment entails not only maintaining clinical competence but also working collaboratively with other professionals to reduce medical error, increase patient safety, minimise overuse of healthcare resources, and optimise the outcomes of care. Physicians must actively participate in the development of better measures of quality of care and the application of quality measures to assess routinely the performance of all individuals, institutions and systems responsible for healthcare delivery. Physicians, both individually and through their professional associations, must take responsibility for assisting in the creation and implementation of mechanisms designed to encourage continuous improvement in the quality of care.
- *Commitment to improving access to care.*  
Medical professionalism demands that the objective of all healthcare systems be the availability of a uniform and adequate standard of care. Physicians must individually and collectively strive to reduce barriers to equitable healthcare. Within each system, the physician should work to eliminate barriers to access based on education, laws, finances, geography, and social discrimination. A commitment to equity entails the promotion of public health and preventive medicine, as well as public advocacy on the part of each physician without concern for the self-interest of the physician or the profession.
- *Commitment to a just distribution of finite resources.*  
While meeting the needs of individual patients, physicians are required to provide healthcare that is based on the wise and cost-effective management of limited clinical resources. They should be committed to working with other physicians, hospitals and payers to develop guidelines for cost-effective care. The physician's

professional responsibility for appropriate allocation of resources requires scrupulous avoidance of superfluous tests and procedures. The provision of unnecessary services not only exposes patients to avoidable harm and expense but also diminishes the resources available for others.

- *Commitment to scientific knowledge.*  
Much of medicine's contract with society is based on the integrity and appropriate use of scientific knowledge and technology. Physicians have a duty to uphold scientific standards, to promote research, and to create new knowledge and ensure its appropriate use. The profession is responsible for the integrity of this knowledge, which is based on scientific evidence and physicians' experience.
- *Commitment to maintaining trust by managing conflicts of interest.*  
Medical professionals and their organisations have many opportunities to compromise their professional responsibilities by pursuing private gain or personal advantage. Such compromises are especially threatening in the pursuit of personal or organisational interactions with for-profit industries, including medical equipment manufacturers, insurance companies and pharmaceutical firms. Physicians have an obligation to recognise, disclose to the general public, and deal with conflicts of interest that arise in the course of their professional duties and activities. Relationships between industry and opinion leaders should be disclosed, especially when the latter determine the criteria for conducting and reporting clinical trials, writing editorials or therapeutic guidelines, or serving as editors of scientific journals.
- *Commitment to professional responsibilities.*  
As members of a profession, physicians are expected to work collaboratively to maximise patient care, be respectful of one another, and participate in the processes of self-regulation, including remediation and discipline of members who have failed to meet professional standards. The profession should also define and organise the educational and standard-setting process for current and future members. Physicians have both individual and collective obligations to participate in these processes. These obligations include engaging in internal assessment and accepting external scrutiny of all aspects of their professional performance.

## Summary

The practice of medicine in the modern era is beset with unprecedented challenges in virtually all cultures and societies. These challenges centre on increasing disparities between the legitimate needs of patients, the available resources to meet those needs, the increasing dependence on market forces to transform healthcare systems, and the temptation for physicians to forsake their traditional commitment to the primacy of patients' interests. To maintain the fidelity of medicine's social

contract during this turbulent time, we believe that physicians must reaffirm their active dedication to the principles of professionalism, which entails not only their personal commitment to the welfare of their patients but also collective efforts to improve the healthcare system for the welfare of society. This Charter on Medical Professionalism is intended to encourage such dedication and to promote an action agenda for the profession of medicine that is universal in scope and purpose.

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