



4. Should physicians inform passersby that they may suffer from an illness?

Published in December 2017

The Ethics Boards was presented with the question: Should a physician who spots an indication of a medical issue in a random person actively approach that individual, mention the indication and warn him?

Such situations could occur, for example, when a physician sees a person on the street with a suspicious mole that could be melanoma. Should he stop that person and mention it? Does an enlarged thyroid require that a physician approach someone on the street and bring the matter to his attention? Where do we draw the line? Should a physician warn a teenager that inappropriate treatment of acne on his face could leave scars? Is there room to address cases such as smoking and obesity?

This involves weighing a person's health, well-being and even life against the person's right to privacy, confidentiality and autonomy.

The Ethics Board discussed the required balance between these conflicting values, all of which are important.

The discussants noted that physicians should exercise sensitivity and deliberation when deciding whether to approach an individual, depending on the severity of the issue and the circumstances. Life-threatening issues, such as a skin lesion that raises suspicions of cancer, are of course much more severe than the example of teenagers' acne that may cause scars. In the latter case, even raising the issue may appear invasive and embarrassing. Clearly, the decision on how to act needs to consider the severity and circumstances of each case. The higher the severity and risk, the more likely the physician is to initiate a conversation. At the far end of this scale, there are immediate emergencies, where physicians must offer help.

If a physician decides to approach a person on his own initiative, he should approach him gently, out of respect for his right to autonomy, in a way that allows the person to turn down medical advice or treatment he does not desire.

Furthermore, physicians should remember that patients have the freedom to choose the medical treatment they receive. Therefore, the conversation should entail a suggestion to be examined by any physician, not necessarily the physician who approached them, and should not be an attempt to convince patients to receive medical treatment.

The rules that protect the privacy of patients should apply to such conversations. Therefore, the physician should approach the specific individual and not his or her relatives or other people (unless that individual is incapacitated or a minor).



The Ethics Board's discussion concluded that:

- Generally, a physician may bring a medical issue to the attention of a passerby, but is under no obligation to do so.
- Physicians should carefully consider whether there is a chance to improve an individual's health and quality of life before deciding whether to approach him.
- Physicians should act with extreme sensitivity.
- Physicians should approach the stranger privately, where no one else can observe or hear the conversation.