

Honesty in Medicine

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### **Part 1: Ethical Question**

Do doctors have the moral obligation to tell the truth to patients even in instances where the truth can be devastating?

### **Part 2: Introduction**

Truth-telling is an important aspect of human interaction as it fosters effective communication. The need, to tell the truth, is emphasized in churches, at home, learning institutions, at work and the doctor-patient relationship (Drane & Reich, 2009). Considerably, physicians are required to sign the “Hippocratic Oath,” a consent that mandates them to uphold the profession’s code of ethics including truth-telling to establish an effective relationship with their patients. As such, doctors are bestowed with trust, a belief that they will be honest in their assertions for the benefit of both parties. It is through this conviction that patients can confide in physicians and seek advice from them. For the treatment to work, that patient needs to have faith in the physician and the treatment, an aspect that is often referred to as the placebo effect (Fletcher, 2015). Often, physicians are perceived as the most trusted professionals given the fact that they are most likely, to tell the truth in most situations.

While physicians are obligated to tell the truth to patients to relieve anxiety and fears, it is a hard task given the fact that the truth can be devastating. As such, this can have a significant impact on the placebo effect given the reduced trust on the proposed treatment (Swaminath, 2010). Notably, the failure, to tell the truth, can take different forms, serve many purposes and result in different consequences (Drane & Reich, 2009). Often, doctors may necessarily not lie to the patient but rather withhold information on the proposed interventions or the patient’s condition or provide information that is literally true but deceptive. This is common for

conditions that are associated with stigmatizing diagnosis such as cancer (Swaminath, 2010).

However, does this mean that withholding information without patient consent is justifiable? The paper will examine whether doctors have the moral obligation, to tell the truth even in instances when truth-telling can be devastating.

### **Part 3: Position Statement**

Even though they are obligated to tell the truth, it is moral for a doctor to withhold information if he/she believes that doing so will benefit the patient.

### **Part 4: Reasons in support of your position**

The withholding of truth by the physician is a form of medical practice that is adapted to protect the patient from emotional harm (Swaminath, 2010). By withholding the truth, the physician can generate optimism which transcends into a placebo effect that is important during treatment procedures (Swaminath, 2010). Additionally, the inability to absorb the full impact of the truth is often used to justify the doctor's decision to override the truth. Considerably, the objective of medicine is to provide care to patients in ways that bring no more harm to them particularly when they are in a vulnerable state. Given this obligation, it is justifiable to withhold the truth from patients.

### **Part 5: Opposing position statement**

A physician should not lie or withhold information from patients as they are morally obligated to be honest.

### **Part 6: Reasons in Support of the Opposing Position**

Truth is the belief that someone is honest and it is with this conviction that patients confide in physicians to seek medical advice. Thus, withholding information is denying patients their right to the truth (Drane & Reich, 2009). Considerably, withholding the truth can be

devastating as compels the patient to participate in the lie. Additionally, lying qualifies as torture as the patient does not have full disclosure of his/her condition (Drane & Reich, 2009).

## References

- Drane, J. F., & Reich, G. H. (2009). Honesty in medicine: Should doctors tell the truth. *American Journal of Bioethics*, 2(1), 14-17.
- Fletcher, J. F. (2015). *Morals and Medicine: the moral problems of the patient's right to know the truth, contraception, artificial insemination, sterilization, euthanasia*. Princeton University Press.
- Swaminath, G. (2010). The doctor's dilemma: Truth telling. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 50(2), 83.