

Ethical Dilemmas *Continued*

perience. The nurse can assist the patient in understanding the information, and can be instrumental in informing the patient of his right to obtain further information from the physician and in helping the patient to do so, by notifying the physician of the need.

Questions about the patient's physician can create difficulty for the nurse. It is interesting that when the patient asks the nurse her opinion of his doctor, the nurse is generally quite comfortable telling the patient when her opinion is a positive one, presumably because the nurse believes that this information will not hurt anyone. Yet it is obvious that the nurse's endorsement of the physician can be very powerful and, if the nurse's opinion is wrong, can lead the patient to serious harm. This is not to say that the nurse should be quick to offer positive or negative opinions about physicians, but rather that she should realize the importance that her opinion may have to the patient.

Generally, offering opinions is not as helpful as is providing information. If the patient asks the nurse about the physician's qualifications and experience, the nurse should inform the patient that he has the right to receive this information from the physician. Furthermore, if the nurse perceives that the patient has concerns about his physician's capabilities, the nurse should inform the patient of his right to consult another physician. A competent physician would prefer that his patient do this rather than harbor concerns about the physician's abilities.

Perhaps the most difficult situation is that in which the nurse reasonably fears that the patient is in imminent danger

To

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because the physician is incompetent. This situation *should* become more and more rare, because the trend in the law is to require hospitals and nurses to monitor the level of medical care being received by patients, and to take steps to remove incompetent physicians from situations where they can hurt patients.³ But when this situation does occur, the nurse should be mindful of her duty to protect the patient from harm, and should take whatever steps are necessary to do so, whether this means informing the hospital medical director or even advising the patient to withdraw his consent.



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In summary, the nurse and the physician each have responsibilities for communicating information to the patient. These responsibilities do not conflict, but rather combine to ensure that the patient receives all of the information needed to make sound decisions about his care.

References

1. *Tuma v. Board of Nursing*, 593 P.2d 711 (Idaho 1979).
2. *Id.*, at 717.
3. *See, e.g., Darling v. Charleston Community Memorial Hospital*, 211 N.E.2d 253 (Ill. 1965).

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