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**American Medical Association Journal of Ethics**

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## ***Virtual Mentor***

American Medical Association Journal of Ethics  
December 1999, Volume 1, Number 4: 26-27.

### **CASE AND COMMENTARY**

#### **Disclosing the Truth about Medical Error**

Commentary by Audiey Kao, MD, PhD

Both ethics and law address norms that govern physicians' behavior.

Many view the law as a baseline for articulating the limits placed on individuals living within society as well as an enabling device to facilitate social relationships. Encompassing as the law may be in some areas of human conduct, in many others it is silent. In the absence of legal norms or prohibitions, physicians often find guidance in the standards arrived at through ethical reasoning. To guide students through the process of ethical reasoning and to acquaint them with case law, a new case study will appear every 2 to 4 weeks. Students will be given legal and/or ethical opinions to assist their decision-making.

#### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Does a physician's duty to disclose a medical mistake depend on the severity of complications incurred by the patient? [1-3]
2. What types of support mechanisms would be helpful for medical students and physicians-in-training to assist them to better deal with disclosing mistakes to their patients? [4,5]

See what the AMA *Code of Medical Ethics* says about this topic in Opinion 8.12 Patient information. American Medical Association. *Code of Medical Ethics 1998-1999. Edition*. Chicago, IL: American Medical Association; 1998.

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Audiey Kao, MD, PhD is editor in chief of *Virtual Mentor*.

*The people and events in this case are fictional. Resemblance to real events or to names of people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The viewpoints expressed on this site are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the AMA.*

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## ***Virtual Mentor***

American Medical Association Journal of Ethics  
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### **IN THE LITERATURE**

#### **Doctoring Doctors and Their Families**

Faith Lagay, PhD

Articles and books on bioethics continue to expand in both number and the range of topics discussed. Between 1989 and 1998, more than 4000 articles alone were published in MEDLINE-cited journals. Some of the major topics examined are the patient-physician relationship, end-of-life care, reproductive medicine, genetics, and the allocation of scarce medical resources. From these publications, we will be selecting a handful of articles and chapters, some of which reflect issues of perennial concern to physicians, others reflect more recent quandries resulting from advances in biomedical technology.

A new article or book chapter will be featured every month, accompanied by questions intended to guide readers along the path of ethical reasoning and to promote discussion.

#### **December Article**

Schneck SA. Doctoring doctors and their families. *JAMA*. 1998;280(23):2039-2042.

#### **Questions for Discussion**

It is alleged that physicians make the worst patients.

- If this is true, what accounts for this phenomenon?
- Does the physician's behavior suggest a blind spot?
- The author offers 10 suggestions for resolving this problem. Are they satisfactory? Would you suggest additional or alternative measures?

Faith Lagay, PhD is managing editor in of *Virtual Mentor*.

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## ***Virtual Mentor***

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### **ART OF MEDICINE**

#### **Pieter Brueghel's Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap**

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD

Pieter Bruegel (about 1525-69), *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap*, 1565. Oil. 38 x 56 cm. Wiltshire, Wilton House.

Art and visual images have long been used to promote healing processes. Research has shown that certain works of art can positively affect patients' clinical outcomes. Representations of nature—for example, a picture of a pond surrounded by trees—can have beneficial effects, whereas abstract artworks, those open to a variety of conceptual interpretations, appear to be less therapeutic in a hospital or nursing-home setting [1-10].

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Audiey Kao, MD, PhD is editor in chief of *Virtual Mentor*.

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## *Virtual Mentor*

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### VIEWPOINT

#### December Birthdays

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD

- December 24 is the birthday of:  
Michel de Nostradamus, physician and prolific prophet of 20th-century events.
- People [interns] will work no more than 6 hours at a time, and this will be in staggered shifts. A whole range of goods and services [phlebotomy and intravenous teams] will be available during the nighttime hours.  
David Goodman Croly (1888)
- By the year 2531, the family will be completely replaced by test-tube conception.  
Aldous Huxley (1931)
- There will be peace, union and change.  
Nostradamus (1557)
- December 25 is the birthday of:  
Clara Barton, Civil War nurse and founder of the American Red Cross.
- Dr. Bernadine P. Healy, past director of the National Institutes of Health, is the first physician to head the American Red Cross.
- More than 4 million Americans donate nearly 6 million units of blood each year. Despite that, regular blood supply shortages occur especially during the holiday season.
- People in good health who weigh at least 110 pounds can donate a unit of blood as often as 8 weeks. To find out where you can donate blood, call 1-800-GIVE-LIFE.

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD is editor in chief of *Virtual Mentor*

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## ***Virtual Mentor***

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### **PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

#### **Through the Patient's Eyes: A Winter's Tale**

Audiey Kao, MD PhD

To arrive at the place where respectful, trusting, open, and truly informed patient-physician communications can take place, one begins by giving the patient undivided, close attention, listening for what is said as well as unsaid. To cultivate this habit of closely attending to another requires practice in listening and interpreting the language, voice, and intonations of others' speech. Through such conscious exercise, each of us also becomes more aware of our own speech affect. Every month, we will present narrated stories from the *JAMA* column *A Piece of My Mind* because spoken words reveal much about the relationship between patient and physician.

#### **December Patient Story**

Davis GJ. [A winter's tale](#). *JAMA*. 1997;277(15):1198.

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD is editor in chief of *Virtual Mentor*

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