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To serve patients

Surely the ultimate goal of all healthcare professionals is to improve their patients' everyday lives, thus enabling them to achieve their goals. The desire to treat disease and to prolong life is certainly commendable, but it must not be allowed to take precedence over patients' informed choices. Only by respecting their patients' wishes, while at the same time remaining true to their own personal ethical values, can healthcare professionals best employ their skills.

Clearly, a prerequisite for a relationship based on mutual respect is a two-way exchange of information: not only from the patient to the attentive, open-minded healthcare professional, but also from the healthcare professional to the patient.

It takes time, trust, availability and an open mind to encourage a patient to examine and express his or her healthcare needs. Healthcare professionals must learn to be wary of their own prejudices and misconceptions regarding the choices made by the patients they serve. They must avoid confusing their own life choices with their patients'.

Patients and healthcare professionals alike need thorough, reliable information to weigh the advantages, drawbacks and harms of a medical or surgical intervention. Often, the importance given to each of these factors will differ between healthcare professionals, pa-

tients and family members, but it is the patient's feelings and opinions that must take precedence.

Who is in a better position than the patient to judge the value of a potential treatment benefit, such as a few extra weeks or months of life, pain relief, the feeling (right or wrong) of being free of a health problem, or the ability to resume certain activities more rapidly?

It is the patient who is best placed to judge the suffering and risks associated with a medical intervention, in terms of his or her own values and life goals: a given patient may or may not accept the inconvenience of taking a tablet every day for 20 years for example, or the risk of impotence or breast amputation, or the fear of losing a job.

Information must be shared openly and honestly with patients and, if necessary, their loved ones, so they can participate in the decisions that will ultimately affect their well-being. This is a key role for all healthcare professionals who want to best serve their patients.

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