



Dealing Ethically and Collaboratively with Difficult Patients

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The following discussion questions are provided as an additional educational tool to accompany this fireside chat video. Please feel free to select the questions that are most relevant to your committee or group, revise and adapt them as needed etc. As always, we welcome feedback on this or any other NSHEN resource.

1. Who defines/ determines who a difficult patient is? How do issues of power and vulnerability play into this?
2. Discuss the statement, “The patient is not difficult – the illness is.”
3. To what extent is it a health care provider’s job to detect dishonesty in a patient?
4. How do you define empathy? What role does empathy play in these situations?
5. What skills and strengths do health care providers require to effectively deal with difficult patients?
6. Does our health care system allow for providers to adequately get to know patients and their families – their needs, concerns, expectations, backgrounds etc.? How do resource allocation issues factor into these situations?
7. How are “patient rights” and “patient-centered-care” organizational policies and practices related to this discussion? How do other organizational policies affect these situations?
8. What are the moral limits of obligation on a health care provider? In other words, to what length should a health care provider go in order to properly treat a “difficult” patient? Is it ever okay to “dismiss” patients or refuse to treat them because they are difficult?
9. What would you suggest to health care providers to help them ease or resolve ethical issues related to difficult patients?
10. What are the effects of these difficult situations on patients, families and health care providers? Do “difficult patients” cause moral distress among health care providers?
11. Discuss cases from your own experience that involve ethical issues related to dealing with “difficult” patients.

Resources

Cleveland Clinic Communicate with Heart Programme

<http://www.communicatewithheart.org/Communicate-With-H-E-A-R-T/Service-Excellence-Training-Communicate-with-H-E-A/Communicate-with-H-E-A-R-T>

Fiester, A. (2012). The “Difficult” Patient Reconciled: An Expanded Moral Mandate for Clinical Ethics. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 12(5), 2-7.

Manos, P. & Braun, J. (2006). *Care of the Difficult Patient: A Nurse's Guide*. New York: Routledge.

Center for Practical Bioethics. (2008). Guidelines for Providing Ethical Care in Difficult Provider-Patient Relationships.

<https://www.practicalbioethics.org/files/guidelines/15-Difficult-Relationships-web-2008.pdf>