

World Medical Association Guidelines on Promotional Mass Media Appearances by Physicians: Starting Campaigns for Ethics

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For physicians, professional ethics is vital in preserving the dignity of the profession. Professional ethics in medicine covers a very wide scope from the traditional physician-patient relationship to medical research. Previously, the physician cared for each patient in the clinic or at the patient's home. However, modern technological advances have changed the route by which patients and the public acquire medical knowledge about health and disease and even the way they meet doctors.

Obviously, mass media and social networks play major roles in the public communication in the area of health by providing the public with useful health-related information. People may readily follow the information provided by physicians appearing on mass media and try to improve their health accordingly. The information provided by physicians through mass media can contribute to the promotion of individual and public health if it is accurate and objective. However, some physicians so called 'show doctor (named by Korean Medical Association, KMA)' frequently appear on mass media and recommend unproven treatments or products for marketing purposes.

The public may confuse health foods with medication leading to unrealistic expectations if they are recommended by physicians. In some cases, people may lose the time to prevent the complications or sequelae of their own diseases. Subsequently this may hurt the patient-physician-relationship. This social phenomenon can be more serious and frequently occur in some countries like Korea where the public can easily accept the traditional or alternative medicine.

The KMA has taken the lead in preventing physicians from being involved in commercial promotion violating their professional ethics (1). As a part of this effort, the KMA established a task force team on this issue and announced guidelines on mass media appearances by physicians in 2014.

As guidelines on this area were found to be unprecedented at the level of national medical associations and the World Medical Association (WMA), the KMA proposed the WMA a guideline on mass media appearances by physicians in February 22,

2015 to promote awareness of physicians around the world on this issue. The proposed draft guideline was accepted as an item of new business and discussed at the 200th Council Session as an agenda of Socio-Medical Affairs Committee, which was held from April 14-16, Oslo, Norway. The Council decided to circulate the draft to its members for review and comments.

Based on comments from national medical associations and other stakeholders collated from June 15 to August 7, the KMA submitted a revised guideline to the WMA General Assembly 2015 in Moscow, Russia in October. We revised the statement to be in a more general and simple context according to the comments. Following productive and constructive discussion and several amendments, the draft was adopted by the 66th WMA General Assembly in Moscow, Russia (2). The time period taken for the adoption of the guideline is shorter compared to the average time period for adoption of other policies of the WMA signaling deep support from members of the WMA on the importance of the issue. The amendments included the change of the name of the guidelines into the WMA guidelines on promotional mass media appearances.

The WMA guideline includes three major categories of recommendations with three sub-statements each, regarding mass media appearances by physicians to prevent them from being involved in commercial activities that may compromise professional ethics and to contribute to patient safety by ensuring physicians providing accurate information timely and objectively.

The KMA has constantly made efforts to establish medical professional ethics in Korea. However emerging ethical dilemmas from the development of mass media and social networks are not only limited to physicians but also considered all health related experts in Korea. It is time for physicians around the world to make efforts to seek the solution of this challenging conflict. The 'WMA Guidelines on Promotional Mass Media Appearances by Physicians' is a starting point for such global efforts for keep professional ethics by physicians around the world.

REFERENCES

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