

Virtual Mentor

American Medical Association Journal of Ethics
May 2001, Volume 3, Number 5: 146.

CASE AND COMMENTARY

Terminating a Patient-Physician Relationship

Commentary by Kayhan Parsi, JD, PhD

Case

Ms. Evans, an OB patient at an urban public university hospital, has been abusing alcohol for some time. Dr. Davis, her obstetrician, is concerned about the health of both Ms. Evans and her 18-week-old fetus. He has repeatedly encouraged Ms. Evans to enroll in an alcohol treatment program before she does irreparable harm to her fetus. In response, Ms. Evans has enrolled and tried to follow the program's regimen, but has slipped back to a pattern of heavy drinking. Dr. Davis is getting frustrated with her inability to commit to her treatment program. Moreover, he's concerned about possible complications in the birth and the newborn's health that may arise as consequences of Ms. Evans' alcohol consumption. He feels his practice is already overburdened with high-risk patients and wants to reduce his exposure to potential liability. He decides to refer Ms. Evans to Dr. Green, a younger colleague who is not as busy.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does Dr. Davis have a professional duty to retain Ms. Evans as a patient under all circumstances? Is her non-compliance an ethically appropriate reason for Dr. Davis to attempt to refer Ms. Evans to another physician? Is his anticipation of birth complications in a practice already burdened with many high-risk patients an ethically sound reason for the transferral?
2. How should Dr. Davis go about terminating his relationship with Ms. Evans?
3. What should Dr. Davis do if Dr. Green does not wish to accept Ms. Evans as a patient?

Kayhan Parsi, JD, PhD is a fellow in the AMA Ethics Standards Group.

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.

Copyright 2001 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.