



SaskEthics

An Ethics Newsletter for Catholic Healthcare Organizations in Saskatchewan

Healthcare professionals attend to patients

Dear *SaskEthics* Readers,



I recently read a news article that contained a jarring sentence. In the article, the reporter referred to a physician who “presided over” her patient’s death. Initially I thought that this phrase unsettled me because of the religious connotation of a doctor being compared to a priest who “presides over” religious ceremonies. But when I looked up the word “presides,” I realized it was more than that.

“To preside” means “to be in a position of authority” or “to be in charge of (a place or situation).” Although I know that my personal opinion on death, dying and religion have a strong influence on me, I think my reaction to this phrase also has to do with how I understand the role of the healthcare professional. I found myself asking: What does it say about the relationship between physician and patient if we talk about the physician “presiding” over the patient’s care?

It seems outdated to think that anyone should “be in charge of” another

competent adult’s healthcare. However, although the field of bioethics has made great efforts to affirm the decision-making authority of the patient, the use of the phrase “presided over” in the news article tells me that the notion of the physician being in control or having authority persists. But if this is not what we want, the next question we need to ask is: what are the alternatives?

In my experience, the healthcare professionals that I have admired most are the ones who place their energy into “attending to” persons, places and situations. They make an effort to be present and to respond compassionately, and, of particular note here, they do not delude themselves into thinking they are in control. Much like a bridesmaid who attends to a bride, they realize that they are not the main character in any story that is unfolding in our healthcare system.

For example, think of the challenge of caring for a patient who is struggling with a drug addiction. If the physician is “presiding over” the patient, it makes sense to think the physician should have the final say in how this addiction is managed. Success or failure rests solely on the physician’s shoulders, who may



St. Paul's Hospital



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actually wind up doing more harm than good if she tries to force a treatment plan on the patient.

However, if the physician is “attending to” the patient, it is appropriate for her to step back and allow the patient’s story to unfold according to the patient’s needs and abilities. Our hope is that this patient-centered focus provides an opportunity for the patient to find a deeper and more permanent healing.

The same holds true when someone is dying. As healthcare professionals in faith-based facilities we are called to

attend to the needs of the dying: to support them, to provide care, and to let go when our role in the story ends.

How does your team approach your relationship with patients and families? Are you the main actor in the story, or a supporting character? How would you want a healthcare professional to “attend to” your loved one?

Dr. Mary Deutscher,
CHAS Bioethicist
(306)-655-5197
mary@chassk.ca



**Registration is now open for
the 75th Annual
CHAS Convention!**

Speakers include:

Sr. Nuala Kenny
Rediscovering the Art of Dying:
Challenges for the Disciples of Christ

Dr. Tracy Trothen
Why values Matter and How Do We
Know What’s Right?: Moral Distress

Gregg Brown
Learning Resilience, Leading Change

Marc Dansereau
Creativity: The Craft that Buys our Grief

For more information:
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For more information or with questions regarding registration:
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