Sports Medicine Ethics Forum

Welcome

The goal of this forum is to explore and learn about the precarious situation surrounding medical ethics and sports medicine: “Is there a fundamental conflict of interest for physicians working privately for professional sports teams? Won’t such physicians work to please the team owner, not necessarily acting in the best interest of the patient?” We question whether or not sports teams should have the right to hire private physicians, whether those physicians should be able to use their sports affiliation as advertising material, whether football players who have sustained concussions should be able to play while injured, and finally if the Hippocratic maxim applies to modern – day athletes at all.

Background Information

Physicians retained by professional sports teams often face a conflict of interest in which they must decide whether their loyalties lie with the players/patients they treat or with the team owner that employs them. It is common practice for physicians to pay sports teams in order to be designated as an “official” team doctor, which intensifies this conflict.

Glares Instances

- **Dr. Arthur Pappas** had long been the Boston Red Sox’s team orthopedic surgeon, but for a time he was also part – owner of the team. He treated Marty Barrett (Red Sox starting second baseman/patient) for a torn ACL in 1989. Barrett later won a lawsuit against Pappas, claiming the doctor hadn’t disclosed to him the extent of his injuries or the recovery time needed to heal. In fact, Pappas sent Barrett for rehabilitation so that he’d return to play in four to six weeks, and in the lawsuit, it was shown that the player didn’t receive necessary reconstructive surgery.
  - This particular doctor has had many ethical run-ins over his career. In fact, one man was prompted to write an opinion piece entitled *The Butcher of Worcester* about the physician.1

- A 1995 *Sports Illustrated* article on Pappas cites an unnamed physician for the Chicago Bears who botched a knee operation and then tried to erase footage of the operation in order to save his job.

- **Dr. Stephen Lucie**, a team doctor for the Jacksonville Jaguars, lost a law suit to former offensive lineman Jeff Novak, who was awarded $5.3 million. Novak sustained a deep bone bruise during practice in summer 1998. After treatment provided by Dr. Lucie, Novak developed a serious bone infection ultimately resulting in his retirement. Novak claimed that by performing his knee surgery in an “unsterile” training room, Lucie caused the infection that ended his career.

1 http://bostondirtdogs.boston.com/Hench%27s%20Hardball%20Columns/The%20Butcher%20of%20Worcester%208-13.html
Dr. George Paletta, a team doctor for the St. Louis Cardinals, bore scrutiny after pitcher Darryl Kile died of a heart attack. Dr. Paletta claimed that tests normal for a man Kile’s age wouldn’t have detected the ninety-percent blockage in 2 of Kile’s arteries. ESPN.com doctors disagreed, claiming that Kile’s father’s death at 44 from a stroke should’ve prompted a stress test.

- “[The team physician] would never intervene on a player’s behalf. He was browbeaten. Coughlin controlled him. That’s who has no spine. He’s a puppet.” — John Jurkovic (Kile’s teammate)

Current Guidelines in Place

The American Medical association has set forth guidelines expressly forbidding conflicts that could place financial gain ahead of patient welfare:

**Under no circumstances may physicians place their own financial interests above the welfare of their patients.** The primary objective of the medical profession is to render service to humanity; reward or financial gain is a subordinate consideration. For a physician to unnecessarily hospitalize a patient, prescribe a drug, or conduct diagnostic tests for the physician’s financial benefit is unethical. If a conflict develops between the physician’s financial interest and the physician’s responsibilities to the patient, the conflict must be resolved to the patient’s benefit. (II)

Additionally, the NFL has rules in place that dictate when players may return to active play. For instance, regarding concussions sustained by players: “These guidelines establish that any player who had loss of consciousness in the field should not return to play in the same day (Pellman et al. 2005).” Many physicians argue however that the rules in place are not conservative enough.

Discussion Questions

1. Should professional sports teams be forbidden from hiring their own doctors?
2. Should doctors retained by sports teams be able to use their status as the teams “official physician” as advertising material?
3. Should football players who’ve sustained concussions be able to play while injured?
   a. It is well documented that the long – term effects of repeated concussion include dementia, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, memory loss, depression, and chronic traumatic encephalopathy
4. Does the Hippocratic maxim apply to modern – day athletes in a strict sense?
   a. The *Hippocratic maxim* translates form the original Latin² (*Primum non nocere*) as first, do no harm.

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² Strangely enough, Latin, not Greek was the language in which this ubiquitous aphorism originally coined. Rather, the title is a hearty nod to the writing of Hippocrates, which implies the maxim.
Works Cited


