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WebMD Study Reveals Doctors Struggle With Ethical Decisions

End of life, privacy and medical errors among topics posing moral dilemmas

NEW YORK, Nov. 11, 2010 /PRNewswire/ -- WebMD Health Corp. (Nasdaq: WBMD), the leading source of health information, today released the findings of a survey from Medscape, the company's physician destination that provides new insight into doctors' attitudes about some of the most frequent and wrenching medical ethical issues of our time.

Over 10,000 physicians responded to the August 2010 survey, which explored ethical issues including end-of-life, pain treatment, insurance reimbursement, colleague relations, withholding information from a patient, patient privacy, and other issues that present moral dilemmas.

"What came through loud and clear through this survey is that by and large, doctors try to do what they believe is right," said Dr. Steven Zatz, Executive Vice President, WebMD Professional Services. "However, the results also highlight the complex ethical issues confronting physicians and their efforts to make appropriate decisions."

Medscape will publish a special series about medical ethics on its website that will feature some of the nation's leading bioethics experts weighing in on why doctors answered the way that they did, and what this means for the future of medicine.

"Today's doctors face more frequent and more complex bioethical dilemmas than in former times," said Thomas H. Murray, PhD, President of The Hastings Center, a bioethical research institute in Garrison, New York. "In medicine, the increased power to intervene now requires that doctors make choices whether to do so or not."

Murray continued, "If a physician recognizes that he or she is having a tough ethical dilemma, it shows that this is a morally conscious individual trying to do the right thing."

The following is a subset of the survey findings. An additional 16 questions dealing with other crucial physician ethical dilemmas and the special series can be found at www.medscape.com.

End of Life Care

When asked whether physician-assisted suicide be allowed in some cases — results were mixed with 45.8% of respondents answering "yes"; 40.7% said "no"; and the other 13.5% said "it depends."

Liability and Medical Error Issues:

The majority of doctors 60.1% answered "no" when asked if it was acceptable to cover up or avoid revealing a mistake if that mistake would not cause harm to the patient, 19% of respondents said "yes" it was acceptable, and the remaining 20.9% said it "depends."

Patient Treatment Issues

When asked whether they would hide information from a patient about a terminal or preterminal diagnosis in an effort to bolster their spirit or attitude — 59.8% of physicians would tell it exactly like they see it; 14.6% admitted they would soften it and give hope even if there's little chance; 1.7% wouldn't tell a patient how bad it was — unless they were going to die immediately; and the other 23.8% said it would depend.

Other Ethical Issues:

On the subject of whether buying organs for transplant should be legal for people if they would not be able to receive an organ by waiting their turn through the national database — nearly 20% of doctors said "yes", but the majority (66.5%) said "no." The remaining 13.6% said "it depends."

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