

Introduction

Over the last decades, health care delivery has developed into a complex system of services provided by teams of professionals, usually within institutions using sophisticated technology. At the same time, the financial pressures on health care delivery have increased, flaws in the health care delivery system translate into subpar patient outcomes and physicians' practice has become subject to a complex set of financial arrangements and incentives. As a result, physicians find it increasingly difficult to meet their responsibilities to patients and society. In recognition of the ethical challenges exacerbated or created by these changes, the European Society for Radiology has formulated a set of ethical principles and professional responsibilities to guide radiologists' conduct in their relationships with patients, colleagues, employers, industry, authorities and society. While the principal focus of health care must be the welfare and interest of the individual patient, physicians must be aware that the interrelationships inherent in a health care system make it impossible to separate actions taken on behalf of individual patients from the overall performance of the system and its impact on society. Radiologist' responsibilities are not limited to what the law requires. This Ethical Code does not represent a set of laws but an ethical framework that aims to guide radiologists towards the highest standard of professional conduct.

Principles of Ethics

The Principles of Ethics form the first part of the Code of Ethics of the European Society of Radiology. They constitute the underlying ethical foundation of the professional responsibilities for which members of the European Society for Radiology should constantly strive.

Principle of beneficence

Physicians have a primary obligation to use the best available diagnostic and therapeutic interventions to promote the well-being of their patients by preventing or curing diseases, relieving suffering and improving their health-status. Altruism contributes to the trust that is central to the physician-patient relationship.

Principle of nonmaleficence

While maximizing the patient's well-being, physicians should minimize the medical interventions' burdens and risks for the patient. They should render service with full respect for human dignity and the best interest of the patient.

Principle of respect for patient autonomy

Physicians must respect their patients' autonomy. They should completely and honestly inform their patients, safeguard confidentiality within the boundaries of law and empower patients to make informed decisions about diagnostic and therapeutic interventions. Patients' decisions about their care must be paramount, as long as those decisions are in line with ethical practice and do not lead to demands for inappropriate care. Any diagnostic or therapeutic intervention requires the patient's informed consent.

Principle of social justice

The medical profession should promote justice in the health care system including the fair distribution and cost-effective use of limited health care resources. Physicians should work actively to eliminate

discrimination in health care, whether based on age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, socioeconomic status or any other social category.

Professional Responsibilities

The Professional Responsibilities form the second part of the Code of Ethics of the European Society of Radiology. They define a standard of professional conduct for all members of the European Society of Radiology.

In order to provide high quality healthcare, radiologists must safeguard clinical independence and professional integrity from increasing demands from society, third parties, individual patients and governments.

Radiologists should be advocates for their patients or the populations they serve but should not manipulate the system to obtain benefits for them to the disadvantage of others.

Radiologists should establish a relationship with their patients that allows them to interpret the images and decide about interventions in the context of the overall medical situation of the patient. They should ensure that all relevant information about the patient's medical history and previous findings is properly transmitted to them.

Radiologists should be committed to protect patient confidentiality. They should not release a patient's medical information without the patient's explicit consent and should only access the images that are necessary to address the patient's medical needs. Exceptions may only be justified if there is a serious risk of harm to the patient or other persons or if it is required by law.

Given the inherent vulnerability and dependency of patients, radiologists should be committed to maintain appropriate relations to their patients. In particular, radiologists should never exploit patients for any private purpose, including personal financial gain and sexual advantage.

Radiologists should strive continually to improve their professional knowledge and skills and make these improvements available to their patients and colleagues.

Radiologists should always be aware of their limitations and be willing to seek consultations when it is necessary. These limitations should be appropriately disclosed to patients and referring physicians.

Radiologists should be committed to continuous improvement in the quality of care. This entails working collaboratively with other professionals to reduce medical error, increase patient safety, avoid overuse of health care resources, minimize inappropriate practice variation and optimize the outcomes of care.

Radiologists have an obligation to secure the safety of their patients and their personnel, especially regarding radiation protection, MR safety and the use of contrast media.

Whenever patients are injured as a consequence of medical care, patients should be informed promptly to avoid serious compromise of patient and societal trust. Radiologists' failure to disclose medical errors (e.g. a missed diagnosis) constitutes unethical conduct. However, the report of the error should be concise and non-judgemental.

While meeting the needs of individual patients, radiologists should provide health care that is based on the best available evidence from research and the appropriate and cost-effective management of limited resources.

Radiologists shall relate to other health care professionals with mutual respect and collaborate with each other for the benefit of the patient.

If a radiologist works in a practice or institution, he/she should place his/her professional duties and responsibilities to his/her patient above the commercial interests of the owners or others who work within these practices. Radiologists should never enter into an arrangement that prohibits the provision of medically necessary care or that requires care at below acceptable standards.

When referring a patient to institutions or services in which he/she has a direct financial interest, a radiologist should provide full disclosure of such interest. Paying a physician for referring a patient to a radiologist is unethical.