

Religion at the Hospital

Betsy is an emergency room physician, and one of her patients, Steve, is probably going to die in the next day or so. Betsy is an evangelical Christian who believes that unless people have faith in Jesus, they will suffer eternal damnation. Betsy has good reason to believe that Steve is not religious in any way.

The hospital has a strict rule against medical professionals trying to spread their faith among their patients. One argument for this rule is that medical professionals are in positions of power and influence over their patients, who are in many cases captive audiences. Hence, using this position for personal religious purposes seems to constitute an abuse of power.

However, if Betsy's religious beliefs are true, then Steve's eternal wellbeing depends on him coming to have a specific religious faith. On the basis of these beliefs, she reasons that the importance of Steve's eternal wellbeing far outweighs the importance of hospital rules, her own job, or Steve's willingness to be proselytized – after all, what could be more important than helping someone achieve eternal happiness?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do one's ethical beliefs relate to one's professional obligations? When, if ever, do the former trump the latter?
2. When, if ever, is it appropriate for a person with power and influence over others to try to spread their beliefs and values to these other individuals? Explain.
3. How, if at all, would the case be different if Steve expressed interest in discussing religion with Betsy?