

An Ethical Dilemma in Modern Optometry

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As optometry's scope of practice expands, the myriad of ethical challenges facing eye care practitioners multiply. The profession of optometry adheres to several ethical theories and values to protect the welfare and health of the public. Among these are the virtue theory and the theory of consequentialism. As well, Optometrists uphold ethical values such as responsibility, charity, fidelity, and integrity. With these standards in place, Optometrists are held accountable for their actions, and regarded as professionals in the health care industry. These ethical theories and values were challenged in this case study at the Veterans Hospital in Amarillo Texas. The patient in the case admitted to being physically abused by their spouse, but did not want to press charges or legally pursue the matter. The situation was analyzed, and a decision was reached on how to handle the issue in an ethical manner.

On March 15, 2012 FR, a 68 year old Hispanic male patient, checked into the Veterans Hospital. The exam was routine, and did not reveal anything out of the ordinary. The external body revealed no cuts, bruises or swelling. The anterior segment of the eye appeared normal; no bruising, sub-conjunctival hemes, or traumatic cataracts. The posterior pole also was unremarkable; no sign of commotio retinae or abuse. The patient's visual acuities were 20/25 in both eyes, and there were no ocular complaints. This exam seemed mundane and not at all extraordinary. Upon selecting new frames for the patient, it was noted that their old frame was bent out of shape. When asked about the condition of their spectacles, the patient hesitated for a moment and then confided that his wife would beat him on occasion, and that the bent glasses were a direct result of these beatings. FR went on to state that he did not want to report the beatings, in fear that legal action would be taken out on his wife. This presented a serious ethical

dilemma: respect the patient's wishes, or report the findings to those with proper authority to deal with the matter. A firm decision was made. Several ethical theories were put into play to arrive at the decision.

The ethical theory of consequentialism was used to arrive at a sound decision. This theory states that "an action is right if it promotes the best consequences"¹. The best consequence in this case is subjective. From the patient's point of view, the best consequence would be to avoid punishment and legal strife with his wife. The eye care practitioner on the other hand could view the situation with a completely different perspective. If the abuse continues, further physical harm and neglect could occur, leaving the body and mind damaged.

The virtue theory was also contemplated as the decision was formed. This theory states that "an action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances". A virtuous agent is bound by several ethical values, such as responsibility, charity, fidelity and integrity. A virtuous agent in this situation would want the best for the patient, and their current and future health.

The ethical value of responsibility demands that a virtuous agent be accountable for their actions. An eye care practitioner must be held accountable to the public for their decisions. The public demands that the case is reported to the proper authorities if certain people are experiencing abuse. In the state of Texas "the law requires any person who believes that a child, or person 65 years or older, or an adult with disabilities is being abused, neglected, or exploited to report the circumstances to the Department of Family and Protective Services"² Since FR is over the age of 65, this law clearly must be followed, and the case must be reported.

Those outside of Texas jurisdiction must abide by their state law. The American Optometric Association also clearly defines what is required by a licensed Optometrist in the United States of America. In the Standards of Professional Conduct, the American Optometric Association states that "Optometrists have

the responsibility to identify signs of abuse and neglect in children, dependent adults and elders and to report suspected cases to the appropriate agencies, consistent with state laws”³. Patient RF in this case is considered an elder, and therefore his case must be reported to the appropriate agency consistent with Texas state law.

The ethical values of charity, fidelity and integrity also encourage that this case be reported to the proper authorities. The ethical value of charity encompasses goodwill, mercy and compassion⁴. Knowing that a patient is abused may invoke compassion in the practitioner, urging them to report the case. The ethical value of fidelity states that the professional has an allegiance to public trust⁴. The practitioner will therefore want to uphold their trust with the public and report the case. The ethical value of integrity demands that a professional exercises good judgment in professional practice. The best judgment in this situation from an ethical and legal standpoint is to report the case. Reporting this controversial case with the authorities demonstrates the ethical values of charity, fidelity and integrity. With these ethical theories and values considered, it was decided to report the patient’s case to the Veterans Hospital Mental Health Unit. An appointment has been setup to discuss the abuse, and find a resolve.

The profession of Optometry adheres to several ethical theories and values to protect the welfare and health of the public. Among these are the virtue theory and the theory of consequentialism. As well, Optometrists uphold ethical values such as responsibility, charity, fidelity, and integrity. As Optometrists are held accountable to these ethical theories and values, they will continue to be regarded as professionals in the health care industry.

References:

1.] “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality”. Peter Railton. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*” Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring, 1984), pp. 134-171 Published by: Princeton University Press

2.] "Report Abuse, Neglect, or Exploitation." *Department of Family and Protective Services*. Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Contact_us/report_abuse.asp>.

3.] "Standards of Professional Conduct." 2011. MS. June 2011. Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <http://www.aoa.org/documents/Standards-of-Professional-Conduct_Adopted-June-2011.pdf>.

4.] "Personal values: Potential keys to ethical decision making". David J. Fritzsche. *J Business Ethics*, Volume 14, Number 11, 909-922,