

The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center
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Written by Marlene Lockey, LCSW, co-facilitator

When Friends or Family Ask

If you work in the medical field long enough, friends, family members, colleagues or even the retail clerk are apt to ask you for medical advice, ask you to use your influence to impact their or someone else's care or even to provide free medical care. The fact that medical professionals are seen as caring persons as well as their being accessible may make them easily approachable for personal requests or favors. At this Schwartz Rounds, two professionals related difficult experiences in which they had to set a "boundary" or limit regarding professional practice. Yet knowing one is making the right response doesn't do away with the discomfort inside that sometimes comes when you must say "no". Their examples prompted those attending to talk about their own experiences and discuss a range of emotional responses when boundaries are challenged in such interactions.

It was generally agreed the most difficult challenge to compassion and professional responsibility are requests from family and/or close friends. One physician related the experiences when a parent of a schoolmate of her child or even the school itself called to tell of someone with cancer and ask if she could help get an appointment for them. She stated that she felt somewhat like the "neighborhood GP" but it was actually satisfying for her to help with a referral or to expedite an appointment. But not all requests are so comfortable to deal with, such as requests outside the clinician's expertise or inquiries about how a patient under their care is doing medically.

These may come in the form of requests for prescriptions or a medical examination or a "curbside consult". When the friend or family member has limited income, perhaps no insurance, then it can be a battle with emotions to refuse to write a prescription or provide medical care. This may also fly in the face of both ethical and legal issues and blur the boundary of whether you are acting as a friend or have entered the role of provider. Family requests can be particularly vexing and invoke considerable guilt when a provider is reminded of times that the family has helped or when family does not have an understanding of professional boundaries or imply that you might be withholding negative information from them. Others unfamiliar with medical codes of ethics or legal issues may not understand our reluctance to cross professional boundaries.

Professionals from different disciplines related their interactions when they were challenged with setting a boundary. Other seasoned professionals representing different professions offered their experience for setting boundaries and dealing with the emotional conflicts that might arise. They suggested having a plan to handle requests that cross boundaries or risk patient confidentiality. For example- When asked how a friend/family member is doing always acknowledge the concern: "You must be worried about Timmy's dad."; Provide reassurance: "We've assembled a good team to take care of him."; Shift the topic: "I hear that your own son hit a home run". If the inquirer does not pick up on the fact that you are declining the conversation and pursues questioning be more direct and honest: "As part of Timmy's father's medical team I can't reveal any information about his care". Redirect: "You might ask Timmy's mom about how he is doing".

Healthcare professionals frequently encounter issues related to professional boundaries. These include not only requests for medical care or confidential information but issues of receiving gifts, personal relationships with patients and families and even financial relationships. It was acknowledged that healthy interactions involving one's medical identity require respected boundaries in order to remain involved while staying grounded and committed to our professional ideals. With a plan for dealing with requests outside established professional relationships, compassion and care can be communicated comfortably through a response that also maintains professional responsibility. Outside interests, community activities, and family are sources of renewal when dealing with the stress of boundary issues and talking to colleagues or obtaining an opinion from a medical ethicist about professional issues that come up which threaten boundaries can be helpful.