

An Ethical Dilemma in Modern Optometry

ASCO Student Award in Clinical Ethics

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As optometry's scope of practice expands, the myriad of ethical challenges facing eyecare practitioners multiplies. 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 theories 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 from a Veterans Administration health center in Texas. The patient in the case, a 68-year-old Hispanic male, admitted to being physically abused by his spouse, but stated he 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.

An Unremarkable Examination

On March 15, 2012, the patient presented for an appointment at the health center. He had no ocular complaints, and the ocular exam did not reveal anything out of the ordinary. The anterior segment appeared normal. No bruising, subconjunctival hemorrhages or traumatic cataracts were observed. The posterior pole also appeared to be normal. There were no signs of commotio retinae or abuse. Visual acuity was 20/25 in each eye. (No cuts, bruises or swelling were seen on the body.)

An Unexpected Disclosure

As the patient was selecting new spectacle frames, it was noted that his old frames were bent out of shape. When asked about the condition of his spectacles, the patient hesitated for a moment and then confided that his wife occasionally beats him and the bent glasses were a direct result of these beatings. He went on to state that he did not want to report the abuse, fearing his wife would face legal action. This presented a serious ethical dilemma: Should the patient's wishes be respected, or should the alleged abuse be reported to those with proper authority to deal with the matter?

Making a Decision

Several ethical theories were considered before a firm decision was made. According to theories of consequentialism, "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. On the other hand, the eyecare practitioner could view the situation from a completely different perspective. If the abuse were to continue, further physical harm and neglect could occur, leaving the patient's body and mind damaged.

The virtue theory was also contemplated. Based on this theory, 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 his or her current and future health. Furthermore, the ethical value of responsibility demands that a virtuous agent be accountable for his or her actions. Eyecare practitioners 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 "anyone who thinks a child, or person 65 years or older, or an adult with disabilities is being abused, neglected, or exploited must report it to DFPS (Department of Family and Protective Services)."² Because the patient in this case is over the age of 65, this law clearly must be followed, and the case must be reported. Those outside of Texas jurisdiction should abide by their state's law.

The American Optometric Association (AOA) also clearly defines what is required by a licensed optometrist in the United States. In its Standards of Professional Conduct, the AOA states: "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 Based on the AOA standards, the patient in this case is considered an elder; therefore, his case must be reported to the appropriate agency, consistent with Texas state law.

The ethical values of charity, fidelity and integrity also suggest this case should be reported to the proper authorities. The ethical value of charity encompasses goodwill, mercy and compassion.⁴ Knowing that a patient is abused may invoke compassion in practitioners, urging them to report the case. The ethical value of fidelity holds that the professional has an allegiance to public trust.⁴ Therefore, practitioners would want to uphold their trust with the public and report the case. The ethical value of integrity demands that professionals exercise 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 to the authorities demonstrates the ethical values of charity, fidelity and integrity.

With these ethical theories and values considered, the patient's case was reported to the health center's mental health unit. An appointment has been made to discuss the abuse and find a resolution.

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 theories of consequentialism. In addition, optometrists are bound by ethical values such as responsibility, charity, fidelity and integrity. As optometrists abide by these ethical theories and values, they will continue to be regarded as professionals in the health-care industry.

References:

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3. Standards of Professional Conduct. American Optometric Association. Accessed 19 Mar 2012. Available from: http://www.aoa.org/documents/Standards-of-Professional-Conduct_Adopted-June-2011.pdf.
4. Fritzsche DJ. Personal values: potential keys to ethical decision making. *J Business Ethics*. 1995;14(11):909-922.

Dr. Harker, a 2012 graduate of the Southern California College of Optometry, is the winner of this year's Student Award in Clinical Ethics. The award is sponsored by the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry's Ethics Educators and Practice Management Educators Special Interest Groups and judged by optometrists with no affiliation to a school or college of optometry.