



Quarterly Letters

Internet Censorship in the Hospital: Bad Ethics and Great Irony

Last fall, I spent a month working in Indonesia under the auspices of a philanthropic organization that oversees volunteers to visit developing world locations in need of neurosurgical help. I was both operating and teaching the local neurosurgeons and their residents. It was very beneficial for my new Indonesian friends, but I'm sure I got even more than I gave. It was a truly wonderful experience for me, and I will be returning this coming fall.

Despite the fabulous month I enjoyed, one rather unsettling event transpired in which I was invited to visit a country home by one of the neurosurgery residents and we inadvertently and completely by accident ended up in the company of two prostitutes on the way. I won't bore you with the details, but I will make it perfectly clear that no inappropriate contact took place and nothing untoward happened to me or anyone else. Neither being disloyal to my wife nor putting myself and my loved ones at physical or psychological risk have ever been options for me.

When I returned to Canada, I wished to publish various chunks of a long narrative I wrote about my experience. Biomedical journals, medical magazines and other publications were all to be the targets of different aspects of the story. Four thousand words of the piece and numerous photos were published in a doctors' travel magazine. Another piece reflecting on the ethical dilemmas encountered by a surgeon working in a philanthropic role in the developing world made it into a peer-reviewed surgical journal. For the tale about my near-miss with a prostitute, which I felt had a number of useful lessons and observations, I thought a "men's magazine" might be an appropriate venue, mainly to reach a large audience – the most likely one to benefit from such a piece. So I tried to look up the submission instructions for *Penthouse* magazine by using a routine search engine on my computer at work early one morning, but found that access had been blocked. I tried a few other similar websites and discovered the same thing. Perhaps I had been naive, but I was honestly surprised. It certainly made me question whether it is appropriate for my hospital to encroach on the autonomy of its staff by blocking access to certain Internet sites.

Clearly, strong paternalism toward healthcare workers is alive and well in the hospital, but is it justified? I assume that the administration's rationale behind this initiative is that they feel there may be decreased productivity by employees if they have the opportunity to engage in cyber-distractions while on the job.

This is essentially what I was told when I made inquiries to our Information Technology Department, and they volunteered that the level of Internet blocking at our hospital was "moderate" compared to some organizations. In all fairness to my hospital, I suspect that versions of the same policy obtain at most hospitals in North America.

But if the administration is worried about hospital employees spending time on unwholesome and diversionary activities, how do they know I don't keep a stack of *Playboy* magazines in my office? If they monitor and block Internet access, will they soon be checking my briefcase in the early morning hours as I drag myself into the hospital at 5 a.m. for another 14-hour day?

In the last few years, I have been interested in organizational ethics and have published a few articles about disrespectful behaviour in hospitals, including one in *Hospital Quarterly*. To me, this is a pretty fundamental example of disrespectful treatment of employees by those in positions of control and power. For hospital administrations to have insufficient trust in people who take on the responsibility of protecting human lives every day presents a set of contradictions to say the least. We are apparently responsible enough to take the care of human lives in our sphere of responsibility, but too irresponsible to control our urges to engage in activities which might waste time and/or might appear unseemly for healthcare providers to be engaged in. The irony appears overwhelming, doesn't it? It reminds me a bit of the quite ridiculous situation in some American states and all but three Canadian provinces and territories, where the legal drinking age is 19, but the age for military service (either voluntary or by conscription) is 18, so a young man or woman can be old enough to fight and die for his/her country but not old enough to legally have a beer.

I am truly disappointed by what I consider a demeaning form of censorship by hospital administrations. While there is always some validity to every argument and decision made, especially by those who perceive a high level of responsibility and accountability for the behaviour of a large group of people, there are unacceptable downsides. The use of power to block Internet access in hospitals results in a clear expression of disrespect toward dedicated healthcare workers, who are more than ever feeling undervalued. Furthermore, I strongly doubt it serves its intended purpose. If employees wish to waste time, they will surely find a way to do so.

I believe a strong ethical argument can be made against hospital administrations blocking Internet sites from nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers. A prohibition on Internet censorship just seems like the right thing to do.

– Mark Bernstein, Toronto Western Site,
University Health Network.

The Correct Caduceus

I note you were looking for feedback on your new “hero” – Caduceus (see *Healthcare Quarterly* 7(2)). It is, as you note, the wrong symbol – just how wrong is revealed in the following excerpt. Do you really want to use a symbol that is “identified with thieves, merchants, and messengers, and Mercury is said to be patron of thieves and outlaws, not a desirable protector of physicians.” I strongly suggest you rework your “hero” and use the staff of Asclepius.

– Trevor Hancock,
Vancouver, BC

The Caduceus: Representative of Merchants and Thieves, Not Healing

By Stuart A. Hayman, MS and Abraham L. Halpern, MD

Before you adorn your next business card or order stationery with the Caduceus, be sensitive to the fact that this symbol might not be suitable for your needs. When correctly depicted, the Caduceus is the image of the staff of the Roman god Mercury, surmounted with two wings and entwined with two snakes (serpents). The Caduceus symbol is identified with thieves, merchants, and messengers, and Mercury is said to be patron of thieves and outlaws, not a desirable protector of physicians.

There is a great deal of confusion among physicians, as well as the general public, regarding the Caduceus as a medical symbol. The correct symbol of the medical profession, the staff of Aesclepius, does resemble the Caduceus, but they are not the same. The staff of Aesclepius, the son of the Greek god Apollo, is entwined by a single snake, not two, and it is without wings.

Perhaps Webster’s Dictionary is partially responsible for promoting the inappropriate use of the Caduceus, which it defines as an insignia bearing a Caduceus and symbolizing a physician. We found repeated misuses of this symbol throughout publications by attorneys, accountants and medical organizations, as well as in multiple sales advertisements.

In 1985, after 57 years, the leadership of the University of Rochester’s School of Medicine and Dentistry terminated the school’s use of the Caduceus on the institution’s seal. They correctly concluded that the doctors and dentists they train should not be identified with thieves, merchants and messengers. The University appropriately adorns its new seal with the staff of Aesclepius, which is the correct symbol of the medical profession and represents healing. Aesclepius, the legendary

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Greek physician, was said to be gifted and wise when a snake adorned his staff. The legend surrounding Aesclepius proclaimed that the Greek physician became so skillful in healing that he could revive the dead.

Zeus eventually killed him, but Apollo persuaded Zeus to make Aesclepius the god of medicine.

Despite its inappropriateness, multiple medical organizations continue to employ the Caduceus to represent medicine and healing. Some of the more prominent organizations that we believe improperly utilize this symbol are the US Army Medical Corps, the Public Health Service, and the US Marine Hospital. The AMA and the Westchester Academy of Medicine are among the organizations that have adopted the correct symbol as part of their logos. The next time you need an appropriate medical symbol, be sure to utilize the correct one ... the staff of Aesclepius with one snake, not the Caduceus, with two snakes.

Westchester County Medical Society

http://www.wcms.org/webpages/director_article1.asp

See also: <http://drblayney.com/Asclepius.html>

<http://www.artsymbolism.com/2002/KimScottcaduceuspaper.htm>

<http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/abstract/138/8/673>