

Ethical Issues in Dermatology

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Ethical issues in dermatology in general are not unique to dermatology as they arise in all branches of medicine. Nevertheless, as we are dermatologists, the focus of this presentation will be on specific examples as they relate to our specialty.

The scope of this topic, however, is too broad to cover completely in the short time allotted to this subject. Thus, this presentation will narrow in on the following issues: fraudulent billing, pharmaceutical industry funding, office dispensing, infomercials, and expert testimony.

Examples of fraudulent billing to be discussed will include unnecessary biopsies, upcoding and discount billing. Pharmaceutical industry involvement in dermatology practice and education will be examined including funding of residency slots, dispensation of drug samples, and industry sponsored events and “freebies.”

This presentation will also highlight the recent phenomenon of dermatology “infomercials,” where dermatologists receive compensation for creating or endorsing advertising that is not based on scientific fact. Dermatologists are teaming up with the pharmaceutical/cosmetic industry to market known products such as antiaging treatments under the clinician’s own name to the general public via pharmacies. This type of product endorsement can be hugely profitable for both parties but is of questionable value for patients and consumers at large.

Another issue that deserves serious attention is expert testimony in legal proceedings. Such testimony is sometimes provided strictly for financial gain regardless of its accuracy with no consequences for the clinician. Furthermore, some dermatologists are marketing themselves as “plaintiff only” experts, as there is often a much greater financial incentive to testify on behalf of plaintiffs than on behalf of defendants!

The ethical issues presented above for the most part have one underlying theme – more money for the dermatologist! Some of these practices are simply wrong and immoral and cannot be justified, while others, such as the dispensing of products by dermatologists in their offices may be of legitimate value to the patient, provided that the patient's interest is kept above all other considerations.

I hope this presentation will at the very least stimulate a debate about these issues and encourage us to act on our consciences.