

Professional Autonomy

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Abstract

The term, “Professional Autonomy”, has been ubiquitous since the World Medical Association Declaration of Madrid on Professional Autonomy and Self-Regulation. The word profession originally means swear to God, declare to the public, and fulfill one’s duty in the occupation one chooses. Furthermore, the origin of the word “Autonomy” goes back to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant who stated that the human will, when working autonomically, transforms into conscience and good will.

Professional Autonomy means that physicians as professionals discipline themselves autonomically, and engage in medical care for their patients with the spirit of positive freedom. We now would like to reaffirm the significance of this philosophy.

Key words Professional Autonomy, Self-Regulation, Declaration of Madrid, Professional, Public mission, Moral law

Introduction

The term, “Professional Autonomy”, came to be known when the WMA’s Declaration of Madrid on Professional Autonomy and Self-Regulation adopted some basic principles during the 39th World Medical Assembly held in Madrid, Spain, in October 1987. Previously, more emphasis was placed on physicians’ professional independence and discretion, and thus the term “professional freedom” was used in lieu of “professional autonomy”. However, there was concern that the nuance of the word “freedom” might convey to society an egoistic impression, such as “refusal of interference” or “aspiration of escaping”. Therefore, the term “Professional Autonomy”, meaning free positive activities as physicians, is considered preferable.

Autonomy means “voluntary” or “self-disciplined”. As such, the positive activities of the physician as a professional literally must be voluntary and self-disciplined.

At the time of the adoption of WMA’s

Declaration of Madrid, it was regrettable that Professional Autonomy was misinterpreted as professional freedom in Japan, and thus did not attract much attention. However, when we now look anew at the principle of Professional Autonomy, we realize that inherent in the principle are very profound concepts.

What is a Profession?

Profession means a professional career. The origin of the word “profession” is to profess, “to swear to the public”, or “to declare to the public”. In other words, “profession” means “to swear to God, declare to the public, and fulfill one’s duty” in the occupation one chooses.

Through the ages, professions consisted of such careers as clergy, physicians, lawyers, and teachers. Historically speaking, it is widely believed that the first professional career was the clergy (pastors), followed by professors. They were followed in the 18th to 19th centuries by physicians and lawyers being referred to as professionals. Nowadays, these two professions

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typify the symbolic concept of modern professional careers.

The characteristics of professional careers are as follows:

- 1) A professional career is a profession with a public mission. It is a profession which serves society without concern for personal interest, gain, or loss.
- 2) A professional career requires advanced knowledge and technology beyond that of the general public. In this sense, it is the responsibility of professionals to ceaselessly study advancing medical knowledge and technologies.
Additionally, liberal arts are essential in the education of professional careers, marking a difference from the vocational education for workers.
- 3) Those who have professional careers organize a group, draw up codes of behavior for the group, comply with the codes, educate the group members for mutual betterment, and operate the group voluntarily. This is to be autonomous, and this autonomy is the key to differentiate professions from non-professions. In this regard, Professional Autonomy means to dominate the decision making of activities to fulfill the responsibilities of one's profession.
- 4) A professional career has its own autonomous qualification system. A professional group creates standards, accredits the qualification as a professional, and gives assurance of quality to society, putting one's status as collateral. If anyone in the group is found to be underqualified as a professional, they will revoke the qualification themselves. This is also autonomy.
- 5) An important requirement of a professional career is to have a code of ethics. There must be self-regulation of the code of professional ethics. This is also autonomy.

What is Autonomy?

The origin of the word "Autonomy" goes back to the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his "Critique of Practical Reason" in 1788, Kant questioned: "What man should do?" and thought that "our inner voice is moral law and this is the voice of conscience given only to mankind".

It is said that there is no one who thought

about "conscience" any deeper than Kant, and he said that human will can maintain its autonomy only when it works as "good will". Moral decision-making is human autonomy, and according to Kant, it is reason.

Kant said that good will and conscience are fundamental to mankind, and that they work autonomously and shine like a gem.

According to Kant's view of Professional Autonomy, "physicians as professionals discipline themselves on the basis of conscience, and engage in medical care to their patients with the spirit of positive freedom".

Professional Autonomy is autonomous in the sense that professions voluntarily create their own code of ethics on the basis of this active and positive freedom and comply with the code by themselves. This will describe the legitimacy of this positive freedom for professional careers as physicians' discretion.

When observing the Declaration of Madrid from this point of view, I have an acute feeling that this principle is indeed full of implications for current medical situations.

The Declaration of Madrid on Professional Autonomy and Self-Regulation

The World Medical Association adopted this declaration to recognize the importance of physicians' Professional Autonomy and professional Self-Regulation. This declaration consists of 10 articles. I will now summarize them simply as follows:

The central element of professional autonomy is the assurance that individual physicians have the freedom to exercise their professional judgment in the care and treatment of their patients.

Professional Autonomy is an essential principle of physicians' professional ethics. If this essential right is given to physicians, then physicians need to take on the responsibility of self-regulation.

The quality of care provided to patients and the competence of the physicians providing that care must always be a primary concern for physicians. Physicians should not apply unconvincing theories to patients.

Cost consciousness is an essential element of self-regulation. Cost containment activities must not be used to deny patients access to necessary medical care.

National medical associations are recom-

mended to create a system of self-regulation for physicians and actively work to maintain the system. By publicizing the system widely to the general public, people will come to have trust in medical care and to give it proper evaluation.

I would like to conclude with some background leading up to the adoption of this declaration. There have been significant advances in new technologies such as gene therapy and reproductive medicine, as well as the emergence of bioethical issues. I think these advancements are not completely unrelated to the adoption of the declaration. Furthermore, the years surrounding the adoption of the declaration was a time when we started to expect unlimited development of medical science and medical care with the

identification of HIV (1983), the discovery of prion (1985), and the start of the human genome project (1988). On the other hand, the discussion of bioethics was active, with an increasing number of court cases taking up medical malpractice issues. With growing media coverage on medical errors or adverse effects from medication, public opinion critical of medical issues was becoming severe. With this background the World Medical Association outlined the principles of Professional Autonomy, and I think the significance is profound.

We, physicians whose mission is to serve the public, must pause to realize the meaning of the Professional Autonomy.