



Manners and Ethics: Is it Wrong to be Rude?

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The connection between manners and ethics is a vexing one. Sometimes we distinguish the two too cleanly, as when we characterize ethics – involving real questions of right and wrong – in contradistinction to the “mere niceties” involved in having good manners. Ethics seems to involve rules the following of which is strictly mandatory; failure to follow the rules of ethics makes us bad people. A lack of manners, on the other hand, seems to suggest at most that we are uncouth, or unrefined. I think this is wrong-headed, both in the general case (i.e., the case of people interacting with each other in the course of their personal lives, or in business settings), and in the particular case of physicians’ interaction with patients.

Let us look first to the groundings of ethics, and then look for the link to manners. One of the primary streams of modern ethical thought says that we ought always to act in ways that show appropriate respect for our fellow human beings. Indeed, “respect for persons” is one of the “fundamental ethical principles of medicine” listed in the preamble to the Canadian Medical Association Code of Ethics, and among the first of the particular obligations listed in the Code is the obligation to “treat all patients with respect.”

The key to the connection between manners and ethics arguably lies in the fact that, in failing to display good manners, we are thereby failing to display the respect for persons demanded of us by ethics. This connection has been pointed out by philosopher Sarah Buss, who argues that, “if we treat someone rudely, then we fail to treat her with respect.” Manners, according to Buss, are a crucial way of signaling that we see others as having value, and as objects of moral concern. “When we treat one another politely,” writes Buss, “we are directly expressing respect for one another....” This goes a great distance toward explaining the role of manners in society in general. Real manners are not a question of finding the right spoon with which to eat one’s soup, but of listening attentively, of speaking tactfully, of showing concern for the opinions, the wellbeing, and the state of mind of our fellow humans.

I would argue that manners are of special ethical significance for physicians, and in particular for physicians in their interaction with patients. Physicians deal with desperately ill patients and families, at times marked by pain, confusion, fear, and often loss. It is at precisely such times that displays of respect are most urgently needed.

Lack of good manners is particularly worrisome in relation to physicians' communication with patients. The physician who fails to listen attentively to a patient's concerns, or who does not take the time to answer a patient's questions, is likely to be in grave danger of failing in his/her obligation to ensure that patients are adequately informed about the course of their treatment (obligations 21 and 22 in the CMA Code). This is not just disrespectful; it can also have bad consequences if the patient consents to or declines treatment based on a misunderstanding.

Of course, even once we realize that manners are ethically significant, we can still find situations in which it will be necessary – and right – to act in a manner that might be characterized as rude. An ICU physician rushing to the aid of a patient in cardiac arrest can be forgiven for *telling* people to get out of the way, rather than asking politely. But this is not to say that physicians have no need for manners; it just means that some ethical obligations are stronger than others.

We must also bear in mind that it is probably most appropriate to draw the link between manners and ethics at the level of patterns of behaviour, rather than at the level of individual actions. While a physician who fails, on one particular occasion, to listen attentively to the worries of a patient may be considered to have been 'merely' impolite, a physician who made a habit of failing to listen to patients would be guilty of displaying a worrisome pattern of disrespect. This focus on patterns highlights the importance of role models in medical education, and suggests a guideline for the College in responding to complaints about individual physicians. It also helps remind us that professionalism is a question of character, as much as it is a question of expertise.

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