After harm: truth-telling, apology, repair, forgiveness in health care work

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Moral and ethical dimensions of care work

• How should we respond to one another after a person is harmed by someone whose goal was to heal?
• How should we care for people who are seriously ill or nearing the end of life?
• How should we manage moral problems produced by health care systems and policy?
Physicians’ emotions after harm(1)

Physicians “experienced powerful emotions following a medical error [and] felt upset and guilty about harming the patient . . . Physicians struggled to find support following a medical error . . . For many physicians, the most difficult challenge was forgiving themselves for the error.”

Physicians’ emotions (2)

In the opinion of one physician interviewed:

“Forgiveness is something that I think is tougher for the physicians to give themselves than to get from the patient.”

Physicians’ emotions(3)

“The notion of a ‘blame-free culture’ of errors did not diminish these physicians’ anguish and sense of culpability for errors . . . Better institutional support for caregivers involved in errors would help them focus their attention on the affected patient.”

Ethical and practical challenges

“Deciding how to share the facts of the situation and avoid speculation while simultaneously managing feelings of guilt, the urge to assign blame, and the desire to protect oneself is hardly an easy task.”

Missing the mark

Jewish traditions and practices concerning ethical responses to human error:

- **chata'ah** (“missing the mark”) = error

- **kapparah** (“atonement”) = individual obligation following from error
Forgiveness as outcome

Error

\[ \downarrow \]

Confession (truth-telling, apology)

\[ \downarrow \]

Repentance/atonement (response to concrete needs of harmed party, e.g., compensation)

\[ \downarrow \]

Conditions for forgiveness by harmed party
Self-forgiveness

“One cannot forgive oneself for what one has done if one is not prepared to take responsibility for it, and the explanation of the failure to take responsibility for some problematic part of one’s past might be that one cannot or will not forgive oneself for it.”

Wrestling with self-forgiveness

Self-reproach (and the need for self-forgiveness) makes sense “for something over which one had some control.”

(Blustein)

• What happened to that patient was terrible.
• What happened to that patient was terrible, and I had some control over what happened.
• How much control did I have?
Love the truth and forgive error.
Further reading


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