

Medicolegal File

Philip G. Winkelaar, CD, MD, CCFP

Use of unconventional medication

QUESTION

My neighbour's father is apparently suffering from cancer. I have not seen or treated him as a patient, but I am told that he refuses standard treatments. My neighbour has heard of an unconventional medication and has read about it on the Internet. He now wants me to prescribe it. Can I do this? *Should* I do this?


ANSWER

Doctors are often asked to treat friends and neighbours on an informal basis. Despite the informality, whenever a doctor gives advice, he or she still has a professional responsibility. Writing a prescription says, in effect, "I recommend that you take this." A patient may then reasonably expect to rely on that advice. If there are adverse effects or the treatment fails, the doctor might be held responsible.

Before writing any prescription or giving any advice, doctors should make sure it is reasonable for the condition being treated. This would generally require that physicians first assess the patient and make a diagnosis. Doctors might also be

expected to obtain information and data from any physician who is already involved in treating or advising the patient.

Treatment can be prescribed only with a patient's informed consent. Informed consent can be obtained only after explaining to a patient the risks and benefits of the proposed treatment, the side effects that might be expected, any possible drug interactions, and the alternatives to the treatment. In the case of unconventional medications, physicians should also emphasize the fact that these medications are unconventional and disclose any limits to their personal knowledge of side effects. Any uncertainty that surrounds use of this medication or treatment should be stated. Doctors should then carefully document all information and advice given as well as patients' responses. An assessment of patients' understanding of the information should also be documented.

To answer your question: You should comply with your neighbour's request only if you can fulfil your professional responsibility to the patient, your neighbour's father. 

Although laws governing medical practitioners are similar across the country, they can vary greatly from one jurisdiction to another. Specific answers to questions cannot be given in a national publication. While the information in this article is true in general, it is intended to bring issues to your attention, not to give specific advice. You should consult a lawyer if you have specific concerns. Members of the Canadian Medical Protective Association can contact the Association at 1-800-267-6522.

Readers may submit questions on medicolegal issues by fax to Dr Philip Winkelaar at (613) 725-1300. They will be considered for future Medicolegal Files.

Dr Winkelaar, a Fellow of the College, is on staff at the Canadian Medical Protective Association in Ottawa, Ont.