Clinician Insights

# Poll: 43% of Doctors Say Lying for Colleague Could Be Justified

Marcia Frellick | March 21, 2017

Most physicians and nurses in a Medscape poll said they would not lie to protect a colleague, though a substantial number felt peer pressure to do so.

The poll followed a *Medscape Medical News* story about a South Dakota surgeon, Lars Aanning, MD, who reported last year that he had lied 15 years ago under oath about his partner's competence to protect him in a malpractice lawsuit. The jury ruled in the partner's favor, and Dr Aanning, 77 when he wrote the article and retired, said he has had regrets ever since.

**Degrees of Justifying Lies**

Of the 922 physicians who responded to the Medscape poll, from anesthesiologists and general surgeons to internists, 57% said lying to protect a colleague was never okay; 38% said it could be justified if it didn't harm the patient; and 5% said it could be justified even if sometimes it is not in the best interest of the patient.

Nurses and advanced practice nurses were more decisive about the justification line for lying for a colleague. Of the 153 who responded to the poll, 82% said it is never justified, 17% said it could be justified but only if the patient isn't harmed, and 1% said lying could be justified even if sometimes it was not in the best interest of the patient.

When the stakes were higher regarding lying under oath, more physicians and nurses said they could not justify lying.

**Would You Lie Under Oath to Protect a Colleague?**

| Answer | Physicians | Nurses |
|--------|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 5% | 2% |
| No | 71% | 87% |
| Unsure | 24% | 11% |

When the physicians were asked if they had lied to protect a colleague, nearly one in four (24%) answered that they had. Among nurses, 14% said they had.

But very few in either group said they had asked a colleague to lie for them — 4% of the physician respondents and 1% of the nurses.

Comments on the poll ranged from outrage to empathy, from those who said lying was a gray area to those who said it was never justified.

One called lying for colleagues "medicine's dirty little secret."

**Pressure to Lie**

A provider from Cameroon listed as working in obstetrics/gynecology and women's health, who commented on the poll, explained that the moral dilemma is complicated in places such as Cameroon, with suboptimal conditions, equipment, and support.

"Combined with the prospects of facing justice from a system laden with corruption, subjectivity and lack of due process, one may, regrettably, find oneself under enormous psychological pressure to come to the assistance of a colleague," the commenter wrote.

In Dr Aanning's controversial op-ed piece in the *Yankton (SD) County Observer,* he wrote: "In essence, no supporting testimony from a defendant physician's colleagues can ever be deemed trustworthy, truthful or true — because those colleagues have essentially sworn an oath of loyalty to each other."

Physicians' and nurses' responses to theMedscape poll show that most in both groups agree the peer pressure exists.

Among physicians, 8% responded there was "an extreme amount" of peer pressure, 21% said there was "quite a bit," and 41% said there was "some" pressure.

Among nurses, 5% answered "extreme," 22% said "quite a bit," and 47% said "some."

Another commenter from obstetrics/gynecology and women's health said that reversing roles may help providers make the right choice.

"We must also remember that today we are medical professionals — tomorrow we could be the patient. How would we feel then, when a doctor lies about their colleague's performance if we are at the receiving end of bad medicine/ethics/treatments?" the commenter wrote.

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