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Why do doctors lie?

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Society holds doctors to a higher standard of honesty than other professions, but like everyone else, they seem to lie an awful lot

In the opening anecdote of the authoritative [magazine profile](#) of the late Christopher Hitchens, the New Yorker's Ian Parker describes a conversation between the British writer and a Stanford-educated doctor in her early thirties. A group of them were out for dinner in San Francisco. Hitchens—the legendary contrarian, known by those unfamiliar with his books and columns for his patrician mannerisms and for getting in fights with talking heads on TV—was holding forth on politics when another doctor came up: Dr. Howard Dean. At the time Dr. Dean was a presidential candidate. The doctor at dinner was a fan. Hitchens was not.[1]

To help explain why, Hitchens referred to a speech Dr. Dean gave in 2003 where the doctor recalled being visited in his practice by a 12-year-old who had been impregnated by her father, presumably to score political points with the pro-choice crowd. After being pressed, it emerged that Dr. Dean had in made up large parts of the story.

"All politicians lie," the woman said.

"He's a doctor," Hitchens responded.

"But he's a politician."

Hitchens was having none of it. For him, what Dr. Dean did was a blatant affront to the medical profession, and her defence of him, a tacit one. "I now know what your standards are," Hitchens told her, "and now you know what mine are, and that's all the difference—I hope—in the world."

Think what you want about Hitchens, but his clear-eyed conviction—"he's a doctor"—made an immediate impression on me. I too believe doctors have a higher obligation to the truth than most other professionals. We journalists treat lies within our profession as a capital sin, punishable by excommunication. Hitchens made me see that the truth ought to be equally sacred among doctors. If you're caring for the most vulnerable members of society, anything less is unacceptable.

But—as the truth often is—things aren't that simple.

A recent [Medscape poll](#) of 922 doctors found that 38% of them could justify lying to protect a colleague if it didn't harm a patient and 5% said it could be justified even if it did. Another 5% said they would lie under oath in order to protect a colleague and 24% weren't sure if they would.

It's tougher to justify lying directly to patients, but there is a long historical precedent for withholding information from them. Some of the writings in the Hippocratic Corpus instruct doctors to "Perform your medical duties calmly and adroitly, concealing most things from the patient. . . . Sometimes reprove sharply and sometimes comfort with solicitude and attention, revealing nothing of the patient's future or present condition." In an 1871 graduation speech, Oliver Wendell Holmes, an associate justice on the Supreme Court of the United States said that "your patient has no more right to all the truth you know than he has to all the medicine in your saddlebag...he should only get just so much as is good for him."

In Belgium, there is an overwhelmingly common but rarely talked-about practice known as "therapeutic silence." As an example, on the ask-and-answer website [Quora](#), one nurse said that Belgian patients over 85 aren't usually told when they have malignant prostate cancer. Physicians reason that it progresses so slowly it's unlikely to be the primary cause of death.

I'm no hardline moral objectivist but, strictly speaking, prescribing a placebo probably qualifies as a lie (about half of U.S. internists [report using them regularly](#)). When people say "mistake" doctors hear "lawsuit," so only about 5% [will disclose](#) when they've made one that led to death or disability. About 15% of doctors (according

to a survey of more than 2000 practitioners) can't deliver a prognosis without some degree of dishonesty, usually painting a rosier picture of the patient's chances than they know to be true.

Most recently, the Texas senate [approved a law](#) to protect doctors who lie about pregnancy risks in a baldfaced attempt to curb abortion rates.

You can probably see where I'm going with this. Doctors lie for the same reasons they are held to higher standards of honesty: because medicine is a political and ethical minefield. And some could quite convincingly argue that that makes at least some of these lies necessary and even good.

But it feels icky to say that, doesn't it? Idealist that I am, I still stubbornly cling to the belief that something changes when people get that MD; like it endows doctors with some special ability to rise above our most natural personal and political temptations to fudge the truth. It's because I—and all people who are, or have been, or will be patients—need to believe that. And in order to make it easier to believe, I think of a doctor's duty to tell the truth (the whole one and nothing but it) as a privilege rather than a responsibility.

It's definitely not a privilege. But I will keep telling myself that and, while I've got you here, I'll suggest that you should too. Because I believe this—the idea that doctors have a tighter grip on the truth than the rest of us—is one of those lies that keeps the profession honest. And to paraphrase Mr. Hitchens, that—I hope—makes all the difference in the world.

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[1] To wit: →Hitchens, in the clear, helpful voice one might use to give street directions, replied that (Dr.) Dean was "a raving nut bag," and then corrected himself: "A raving, sinister, demagogic nut bag." —