

9.1.3. Licensee Employment

The Board recognizes that the practice of medicine continues to shift from licensees practicing in personally owned practices toward licensees practicing while subject to employment and other contractual relationships with hospitals, group practices, and other health systems. The medical practice of the employed licensee creates unique challenges to maintaining professionalism in the practice of medicine.

In order for licensees to avoid putting themselves in professional situations that may expose them to sanctions by the Board, the Board recommends licensees consider the following when entering a new work environment:

- Understand the organizational structure and ownership of the practice or healthcare system.
- Employment agreements are legal documents. Licensees should seek their own legal counsel before signing them.
- Be familiar with written *and* unwritten policies for healthcare delivery within the practice or healthcare system.
- Consider whether the practice or healthcare system conforms to the standards of acceptable and prevailing medical practice and the ethics of the medical profession and that it reflects your personal standards.
- Recognize that your obligation to provide care that conforms to the standards of acceptable and prevailing medical practice, or the ethics of the medical profession, may require you to leave a situation that does not allow you to provide such care.
- Recognize that your position in an organization that removes you from direct patient care such as a supervisor, medical director, vice president of medical affairs, etc., does not remove you from professional ethical obligations. Decisions you make related to patient care and the supervision, management, and termination of Board licensees may also expose you to sanctions by the Board.
- Patient welfare must take priority in any situation where the interests of licensees' and employers' conflict.

In order to provide further guidance to licensees, the Board adopts and endorses portions of the AMA's Principles for Physician Employment H-225.950. While these principals are directed at physicians, the Board directs all licensees of the Board to review these principals and consider them when entering into an employment relationship with a medical practice or healthcare system.

In relevant part, the language of AMA H-22.950 provides:

1. Addressing Conflicts of Interest

- a. A physician's paramount responsibility is to his or her patients. Additionally, given that an employed physician occupies a position of significant trust, he or she owes a duty of loyalty to his or her employer. This divided loyalty can create conflicts of

interest, such as financial incentives to over- or under-treat patients, which employed physicians should strive to recognize and address.

- b. Employed physicians should be free to exercise their personal and professional judgment in voting, speaking, and advocating on any manner regarding patient care interests, the profession, health care in the community, and the independent exercise of medical judgment. Employed physicians should not be deemed in breach of their employment agreements, nor be retaliated against by their employers, for asserting these interests. Employed physicians also should enjoy academic freedom to pursue clinical research and other academic pursuits within the ethical principles of the medical profession and the guidelines of the organization.
- c. In any situation where the economic or other interests of the employer are in conflict with patient welfare, patient welfare must take priority.
- d. Physicians should always make treatment and referral decisions based on the best interests of their patients. Employers and the physicians they employ must assure that agreements or understandings (explicit or implicit) restricting, discouraging, or encouraging particular treatment or referral options are disclosed to patients.
 - i. No physician should be required or coerced to perform or assist in any non-emergent procedure that would be contrary to his/her religious beliefs or moral convictions; and
 - ii. No physician should be discriminated against in employment, promotion, or the extension of staff or other privileges because he/she either performed or assisted in a lawful, non-emergent procedure, or refused to do so on the grounds that it violates his/her religious beliefs or moral convictions.
- e. Assuming a title or position that may remove a physician from direct patient-physician relationships--such as medical director, vice president for medical affairs, etc.--does not override professional ethical obligations. Physicians whose actions serve to override the individual patient care decisions of other physicians are themselves engaged in the practice of medicine and are subject to professional ethical obligations and may be legally responsible for such decisions. Physicians who hold administrative leadership positions should use whatever administrative and governance mechanisms exist within the organization to foster policies that enhance the quality of patient care and the patient care experience.

Refer to the [AMA Code of Medical Ethics](#) for further guidance on conflicts of interest.

2. Advocacy for Patients and the Profession

- a. Patient advocacy is a fundamental element of the patient-physician relationship that should not be altered by the health care system or setting in which physicians practice, or the methods by which they are compensated.

- b. Employed physicians should be free to engage in volunteer work outside of, and which does not interfere with, their duties as employees.

3. Contracting

- a. Physicians should be free to enter into mutually satisfactory contractual arrangements, including employment, with hospitals, health care systems, medical groups, insurance plans, and other entities as permitted by law and in accordance with the ethical principles of the medical profession.
- b. Physicians should never be coerced into employment with hospitals, health care systems, medical groups, insurance plans, or any other entities. Employment agreements between physicians and their employers should be negotiated in good faith. Both parties are urged to obtain the advice of legal counsel experienced in physician employment matters when negotiating employment contracts.
- c. When a physician's compensation is related to the revenue he or she generates, or to similar factors, the employer should make clear to the physician the factors upon which compensation is based.
- d. Termination of an employment or contractual relationship between a physician and an entity employing that physician does not necessarily end the patient-physician relationship between the employed physician and persons under his/her care. When a physician's employment status is unilaterally terminated by an employer, the physician and his or her employer should notify the physician's patients that the physician will no longer be working with the employer and should provide them with the physician's new contact information. Patients should be given the choice to continue to be seen by the physician in his or her new practice setting or to be treated by another physician still working with the employer. Records for the physician's patients should be retained for as long as they are necessary for the care of the patients or for addressing legal issues faced by the physician; records should not be destroyed without notice to the former employee. Where physician possession of all medical records of his or her patients is not already required by state law, the employment agreement should specify that the physician is entitled to copies of patient charts and records upon a specific request in writing from any patient, or when such records are necessary for the physician's defense in malpractice actions, administrative investigations, or other proceedings against the physician.
- e. Physician employment agreements should contain provisions to protect a physician's right to due process before termination for cause. When such cause relates to quality, patient safety, or any other matter that could trigger the initiation of disciplinary action by the medical staff, the physician should be afforded full due process under the medical staff bylaws, and the agreement should not be terminated before the governing body has acted on the recommendation of the medical staff. Physician employment agreements should specify whether or not termination of employment is grounds for automatic termination of hospital

medical staff membership or clinical privileges. When such cause is non-clinical or not otherwise a concern of the medical staff, the physician should be afforded whatever due process is outlined in the employer's human resources policies and procedures.

- f. Physicians are encouraged to carefully consider the potential benefits and harms of entering into employment agreements containing without cause termination provisions. Employers should never terminate agreements without cause when the underlying reason for the termination relates to quality, patient safety, or any other matter that could trigger the initiation of disciplinary action by the medical staff.¹
- g. Physicians are discouraged from entering into agreements that restrict the physician's right to practice medicine for a specified period of time or in a specified area upon termination of employment.
- h. Physician employment agreements should contain dispute resolution provisions. If the parties desire an alternative to going to court, such as arbitration, the contract should specify the manner in which disputes will be resolved.

Refer to the AMA Annotated Model Physician-Hospital Employment Agreement and the AMA Annotated Model Physician-Group Practice Employment Agreement for further guidance on physician employment contracts.

4. Peer Review and Performance Evaluations

- a. All physicians should promote and be subject to an effective program of peer review to monitor and evaluate the quality, appropriateness, medical necessity, and efficiency of the patient care services provided within their practice settings.
- b. Peer review should follow established procedures that are identical for all physicians practicing within a given health care organization, regardless of their employment status.
- c. Peer review of employed physicians should be conducted independently of and without interference from any human resources activities of the employer. Physicians--not lay administrators--should be ultimately responsible for all peer review of medical services provided by employed physicians.
- d. Employed physicians should be accorded due process protections, including a fair and objective hearing, in all peer review proceedings. The fundamental aspects of a fair hearing are a listing of specific charges, adequate notice of the right to a

¹ Termination of a licensee of the Board for issues related to quality, patient safety, or any other matter that could trigger an inquiry by the Board, should be reported to the Board consistent with [N.C. Gen. Stat. § 90-14.13](#). The physician supervisor of said terminated Board licensed employee has the professional ethical responsibility to assure that proper reporting has occurred and may face an inquiry by the Board for the failure to do so.

hearing, the opportunity to be present and to rebut evidence, and the opportunity to present a defense. Due process protections should extend to any disciplinary action sought by the employer that relates to the employed physician's independent exercise of medical judgment.

- e. Employers should provide employed physicians with regular performance evaluations, which should be presented in writing and accompanied by an oral discussion with the employed physician. Physicians should be informed before the beginning of the evaluation period of the general criteria to be considered in their performance evaluations, for example: quality of medical services provided, nature and frequency of patient complaints, employee productivity, employee contribution to the administrative/operational activities of the employer, etc.
- f. Upon termination of employment with or without cause, an employed physician generally should not be required to resign his or her hospital medical staff membership or any of the clinical privileges held during the term of employment, unless an independent action of the medical staff calls for such action, and the physician has been afforded full due process under the medical staff bylaws. Automatic rescission of medical staff membership and/or clinical privileges following termination of an employment agreement is tolerable only if each of the following conditions is met:
 - i. The agreement is for the provision of services on an exclusive basis; and
 - ii. Prior to the termination of the exclusive contract, the medical staff holds a hearing, as defined by the medical staff and hospital, to permit interested parties to express their views on the matter, with the medical staff subsequently making a recommendation to the governing body as to whether the contract should be terminated, as outlined in AMA Policy H-225.985; and
 - iii. The agreement explicitly states that medical staff membership and/or clinical privileges must be resigned upon termination of the agreement.

Refer to the AMA Principles for Incident-Based Peer Review and Disciplining at Health Care Organizations ([AMA Policy H-375.965](#)) for further guidance on peer review.

5. Payment Agreements

- a. Although they typically assign their billing privileges to their employers, employed physicians or their chosen representatives should be prospectively involved if the employer negotiates agreements for them for professional fees, capitation or global billing, or shared savings. Additionally, employed physicians should be informed about the actual payment amount allocated to the professional fee component of the total payment received by the contractual arrangement.
- b. Employed physicians have a responsibility to assure that bills issued for services they provide are accurate and should therefore retain the right to review billing claims as may be necessary to verify that such bills are correct. Employers should

indemnify and defend, and save harmless, employed physicians with respect to any violation of law or regulation or breach of contract in connection with the employer's billing for physician services, which violation is not the fault of the employee.