



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2005

I14 Physician Participation in Executions

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After attending this presentation, attendees will know what actions are prohibited and what actions are allowed by the code of medical ethics in connection with the execution of death row inmates.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by helping physicians in death penalty jurisdictions adhere to the code of medical ethics' canon against participation in executions.

More than 740 persons have been executed in the United States by lethal injection over the past 25 years. Notwithstanding the codes of ethics of the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association prohibiting participation in legal executions, physicians have indeed participated, in one way or another, in most, if not all, of these cases. Actions not allowed, i.e., actions that constitute participation in executions are: 1) selecting fatal injection sites; 2) rendering of technical advice regarding executions; 3) starting intravenous lines as a port of a lethal injection device; 4) prescribing or administering pre-execution injection drugs or their doses or types; 5) inspecting, testing, or maintaining lethal injection devices; consulting with or supervising lethal injection personnel; 6) monitoring vital signs on site or remotely (including monitoring of elec- trocardiograms); 7) performing medical examinations during the execution to determine whether or not the prisoner is dead; 8) attending, observing or witnessing executions as a physician; and 9) treating an incompetent-to-be- executed death row inmate to render him competent unless a commutation order is issued before treatment begins.

Given that many state laws preclude the disciplining of participating physicians on the grounds that participation in executions is not considered the practice of medicine and that in no instance has a participating physician been disciplined by a medical society, it is the view of the pre- senters that nothing less than abolition of capital punishment can bring to an end the unethical participation of physicians in executions. Nevertheless, since it is incumbent on all physicians to abide by the code of medical ethics, they should be knowledgeable about the canon against participation in legally authorized executions and the specific prohibited actions that constitute participation.

Death Penalty, Physician Participation, Legal Executions