

Spotlight on the AAMA Code of Ethics

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Standard Number Four: “Members shall maintain the confidentiality of privileged information entrusted or known to them by virtue of any leadership role they may have with the American Academy of Medical Administrators.”

In health care, more than any other business, we can become intimately involved in the life of our customers. We are responsible for the care of patients when they are at their most vulnerable moments. We work with the Medical Staff so closely that we gain in depth knowledge of the way that they conduct their practice. We are deeply involved with community leadership through our own Board of Directors as well as our own community service activities. Many times we gain detailed knowledge of personal and professional details of the lives of our employees. Medical administrators are obligated to act in such a way that they deserve the confidence and trust of healthcare professionals, employees, patients, family members, and the community. Creating and maintaining positive relationships with all of these groups is the basis for effective management.

Our leadership role in the Academy provides us with knowledge that we would otherwise never acquire. While not all of this information falls into the privileged category, we must be very careful to understand whether there are any stated or implied confidentiality requirements in anything that we learn. One of the very important functions of a professional association is to provide a setting for the membership where they can feel free to explore possible solutions to any situation that they may be encountering without concern that the information may later be used to their personal detriment. The AAMA provides a very valuable forum for the exploration of our many challenges and an opportunity for us to learn from the experiences of others. This benefit is so valuable that we, as leaders, must protect it by meeting the high standard suggested by the statement of ethical principles.

The key characteristic of the people that I most respect is that they are trustworthy. I believe that this standard goes directly to the heart of the concept of trust in a professional relationship. Each of us needs a friend, a confidant, with whom we are comfortable to share the always complex and sometimes deeply troubling demands of the position that we hold. AAMA is an organization that expects us to be the kind of trustworthy, professional people that deserve the confidence that others place in us by sharing the difficult experiences and looking to us for advice and counsel.

While the fourth standard of the AAMA Code of Ethics refers only to information that we might learn in our role as leaders in AAMA, much more than that is implied here. We must earn the trust of many constituencies in order to effectively carry out our responsibilities to our organization, our patients and our community. We can only earn that trust by honesty and integrity in all of our relationships and by respecting all professional confidences regardless of the source. Emmanuel Kant clearly made this point when he stated, “Act so as to treat humanity always as an end and never only as a means.” When we violate the confidences shared by our friends and acquaintances, we are using their information, and therefore them, for personal gain.

Competitive challenges have dramatically changed the way that medical administrators function in today's health care system. This competitive environment affects our relationship with our peers. Almost every decision that is made must be balanced against that of the competition. Therefore in-depth sharing of the challenges that we face in our professional lives is very difficult at the local level. Loyalty to our institution may be valued over professional ethics and morality, making it difficult to accept information from our peers knowing that it may be useful to our own competitive situation. In this environment, it is imperative that we face up to the challenge and preserve our sense of obligation for moral leadership.