

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

An Old Play for a New Day: e-Discussions with medical students about ethics in rural health

The Activist Physician

Conflicts Between Individual Principles Of Behavior, Group Norms And The Collective Good The Enemy Of The People – by Henrik Ibsen

There is a well-known medical maxim – “First, do no harm” - from which one of the first biomedical ethical principles – that of non-maleficence - is derived. But the real world is complicated and we often are conflicted when we contrast effects on individuals (doctors and patients), families and communities of actions taken by various players.

Mona Hanna-Attisha, M.D. is a pediatrician who helped expose the lead water crisis in Flint, Michigan, who saw the dangers of ingested lead as a neurotoxin in children. On 24 September 2015, in a press conference at Flint's Hurley Medical Center where she works, Dr. Hanna-Attisha revealed that Flint children's blood lead levels doubled after the water was switched from the Detroit River to the Flint River in April 2014. Dr. Hanna-Attisha's research was initially ridiculed by the State of Michigan, when a Michigan Department of Environmental Quality spokesperson accused her of being an "unfortunate researcher" "splicing and dicing numbers" who was causing "near hysteria". State opposition was nullified and retracted following further investigation of her claims.

In Enemy of the People, the reluctant hero Dr. Stockman believes strongly that he must save the town and his patients from harm by advocating the closure of the Baths – a source of community pride and economic sustenance. He sees the early support for his position begin to fade when the mayor (his brother) and some of the “powerbrokers” of the community (the press among others) seek compromise and a less drastic solution than Dr. Stockman’s. Early allies abandon him. Stockman, in turn, “goes public” with his information, and his rant against the townsfolk at the public meeting – and his public insults and name calling of them – may make him seem quite arrogant and stubborn. The community, in general, rejects Dr. Stockman, and he and his daughter both are terminated from their positions as physician and school teacher respectively. “A man alone cannot accomplish anything.”

But Dr. Stockman is never really alone – although the relationships with his wife and daughter are tense at times, they strongly support him throughout, all along the path to social and fiscal ruination.

Begin by reading and reflecting on the play by Ibsen. It has been placed on Canvas as an attachment to the session on Monday, December 14, 2020 from 1 to 4pm. Each of the five areas will be examined by one group as assigned (e.g. Learning Community 1 would take questions under 1, LC2 would take 2, etc.) Following that, please meet with your Learning Community to discuss the listed questions and areas of concern. Additionally, feel free to discuss other current circumstances where you as physician do or will play a central role in formulating and informing public actions. Discuss what might be the most useful approaches to take.

1. The public role of the press and social media

It is a truism that the journalists' responsibility is to report the truth. Many times, however, it may be difficult to define whose truth should be promulgated. In the play, are the "facts" about the harmful effects of the baths accurately and factually reported? What may alter the reporting? Is the mayor's analysis of the potential fiscal penalty with full disclosure - his belief that this could ruin the community economically - factual or speculative? What if the mayor's predictions are valid and accurate? Does this change the "facts" of the situation? Are not those "facts" as important as are Dr. Stockman's?

2. Aspects of moral struggles

Can a moral struggle to be solved by economic means – or vice versa? Who makes the final decision in a case like this, and how does a community adapt to the changed situation once that decision is made? Whose "facts" are more valuable to the majority? Is this a conflict between a community majority whose opinion (and votes) are manipulated by the government and the press and economic concerns or is the conflict between science and propaganda, between altruism and self-interest? How do we define "truth" and "fact"? Is it necessary to slander and ostracize minority members of the group in order to reach a final majority decision?

3. Conflict Resolution

One critic has characterized this dilemma as impossible to satisfactorily resolve because it is a conflict of personalities and not of principles. Do you agree with that statement? Can we not agree on principles and largely ignore individual personalities? What principles apply in public health situations – can mask wearing during a pandemic be required for "the public good"? When does "the state", the community, or the physician representing the best current medical knowledge have the power to intervene and supersede individual freedom of choice?

4. Democratic Action and Personal Responsibility

In what circumstances does a government have the right to withhold information from the governed? Is Dr. Stockman the sole character in the play described as influenced by morality and truth or are there others as well? Who are they and how do they “fit” their moral stance against potential solutions? How do they attempt to balance the different facets of the community’s actions? How effective can a group decision process be? Is the efficacy of the decision-making process better or worse when numbers are small or large? Why is Dr. Stockman characterized by others as an “enemy of the people”? Is this because he insults the principle of democratic action that the majority rules? What happens if the majority is not correct? Is it because he refuses to subordinate his ideas and conclusions to those of the larger group? Is this a position of strength because he refuses to abrogate his personal and professional moral code and adopt a “practical” solution? Or is it simply because he doesn’t get his way and decides to be a whistleblower anyway? What do you think are the most important reasons for his pejorative titling as “enemy”?

5. Problems of Moral Distress

Have you ever been in a “lonely” position as was Dr. Stockman? How did you resolve the differences between your position and that of the majority? How does it feel when a moral position that you hold is questioned by others? Dr. Stockman asserts that we should not abandon our principles even if there is a price to pay. “The thing is, you see, that the strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone” (Act V, final line). How do you think Dr. Hanna-Attisha felt in Flint, Michigan? Who might consider Dr. Anthony Fauci an enemy of the people and how might he feel when at odds with administration?