

Pharmacist Joan Smith receives a call from a patron who identifies herself as having leukemia. The patron wants information about a new medication he has read about, but of which his physician is completely unaware. Joan does some research and learns the following. The medication costs \$30 per ounce and about \$4.00 a day. There is no scientific data indicating the efficacy of the medication for treatment of leukemia, but there are some clinical indications of negative side effects, such as nausea, headaches, and temporary loss of hearing. Joan is concerned that the patron may believe that the medication is effective and, as a result, forego more, possibly, effective medical treatment.

What should Joan do?

(based on case in Hastings Center Report, May/June, 1989)

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Pharmacists have a professional obligation to do no harm but they also must respect the autonomy (right to choose) of patrons in regard to their decisions concerning their health. In this case Joan would meet her professional obligation and also respect the patron's autonomy by sharing with him everything she has learned about the medication, including how to obtain it. Joan should also emphasize that the patient should probably look into other, potentially more effective treatments before deciding to rely solely on this medication.

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