

VIEW POINT

Patients' Gifts: Should Physicians Accept Them?**Mohsen Eledrisi, Abdel-Naser Elzouki**

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"After 10 days of a complicated hospital course, the patient recovered and was ready for discharge. He was very grateful to the caring team, so he handed a gift to the treating physician reflecting his appreciation and gratitude."

Several questions rise when a patient provides a gift to the physician. Why do patients give gifts to their physicians? What does the gift mean to the patient? What is the drive behind giving the gift? Is it a sign of appreciation or an attempt to receive preferential care? What does gift-giving represent in the surrounding culture? When should physicians consider the gift as a possible influence on the patient-physician relationship? What could be the implications of refusing the gift? Should the physician accept the gift? Would refusal of the gift cause embarrassment to the patient and harm the patient-physician relationship?

The subject of patients' gifts to their physicians is important and can cause an ethical dilemma. Physicians often receive gifts from patients who wish to express their gratitude for the care they have received. Even though gift-giving is common in clinical practice, data on this matter is limited (1). A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that 20% of physicians report that they had received a gift from a patient in the preceding three months (2). Gifts varied including chocolates, food, baked goods and even money.

Patients have different intentions when they provide gifts to their physicians. Such gifts are generally viewed as an expression or a reflection of cultural tradition (3). Other motivations can include an equalization of the balance that patients view as power sharing with their physicians. Some patients may use gifts to gain the attention of their physicians or to manipulate them into providing preferential services (3,4).

There is no agreement as to whether physicians should accept gifts from patients. Physicians deal with patients'

gifts in different ways: never accept, always accept gifts or accept with conditions (3,5-7). Some physicians feel it's reasonable to accept gifts that they view as a small token of appreciation with little financial value such as gift cards, chocolates or food and gifts that are not personal (4,5). Some physicians take it further and avoid any conflict of interest by showing their patients that the gifts will be shared with members of the caring team. Some argue that patients' gifts to physicians can strengthen the patient-physician relationship, recognize patient autonomy, enhance patient satisfaction and reinforce trust (3,5,8).

The consequences of rejecting gifts should also be considered. If a gift is rejected, the patient might feel offended (3-5). In some cultures such as Islamic/Arabic societies, providing gifts is an important part of community values and gift rejection might be perceived as impolite (6).

The American College of Physicians (ACP) proposes that "A small gift [from the patient] to a physician as a token of appreciation is not ethically problematic." (9). The ACP notes, however, that consideration should be given to the nature of the gift, the potential implications for the physician-patient relationship of accepting or refusing it, and the patient's probable motivations and expectations and that favored treatment as a result of acceptance of any gift is problematic and undermines professionalism and may also interfere with objectivity in the care of the patient (9).

The General Medical Council (GMC) of the United Kingdom suggests that physicians may accept unsolicited gifts from patients or their relatives provided this does not affect, or appear to affect, the way they prescribe for, advise, treat, refer, or commission services for patients and physicians have not used their influence to pressurize or persuade patients or their relatives to offer gifts (10). The GMC recommends that physicians

should not accept a gift if there is any risk that it may influence their professional decision making.

In addition to considering the patient's motivation, physicians should also take into account other factors such as the cost of the gift, the timing and the situation surrounding the gift, and the cultural background of the patient (4,11,12).

Because of potential conflict of interest and their influence on the patient-physician relationship, physicians should strongly consider refusing high-value gifts. Gifts may not be a surprise if given after a significant medical service such as recovery from a major illness or surgery or during seasonal holidays. However, gifts given with no obvious occasion or reason may require the physician to examine the surrounding situation, patient motivation and the nature of the gift and consider rejecting the gift (3,8,11).

The cultural background of the patient and probably of the physician is an important factor when considering acceptance or refusal of the gift. In the Arabic/Islamic culture gifts are considered a sign of appreciation and respect and Islamic values encourage gifts as means of enhancing social relationships. However, the situation is different when it comes to gifts provided by patients to their physicians. There are no published data on the subject of gift of patients to physicians in the Islamic/Arabic culture. From the "Islamic Sharia" view point, accepting gifts from patients is generally allowed (13,14). However, one view recommends a preference to refuse patients' gifts given the possibility of bias and bribe (14). Another view puts a condition that accepting gifts does not lead the physician to provide preferential treatment to the patient (13).

In conclusion, there are no definite rules to determine when a physician should accept or refuse a gift from patients. Even though there is no fixed value that determines if the gift is appropriate or not, the value of the gift can be used, with a trend toward accepting low cost gifts such as cards, chocolate or food. Refusal of the gift should be considered if the gift is seen as more than a small token of appreciation such as expensive items or money, there is a high risk of influence on the physician's professional decision-making or there is a possibility that the physician may feel obligated to provide preferential service to the patient. One measure that can be used to decide in such cases is whether the physician would be comfortable if acceptance of the gift were known to colleagues or the public (3).

Given the paucity of data on the subject of patients' gifts to physicians related to the Islamic/Arabic culture, further research is required. Medical institutions and ethical committees should discuss this subject and provide guidelines to physicians in this regard.

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