

1. One Time Slip-Up?

Marcie is a pediatrician who lives and works in the same community. Over the years, her family has become well-entrenched in community activities. Marcie's husband coaches one of the community soccer teams and Marcie serves on several school committees. Her children are friends, classmates, or teammates with some of her patients.

Marcie enjoys this familiarity and likes the feeling of knowing her patients as "people," aware of their interests, goals, and activities, outside of the medical setting. She feels it makes her a better doctor. Nevertheless, she is careful about keeping her personal and professional relationships separated, understanding the complications that can occur when treating close friends.

Last night, Marcie's daughter, Shannon, came to her with a problem. Shannon is friends with Julie, one of Marcie's diabetic patients. They are in the same 7th grade classroom. Shannon is concerned because she just saw an Instagram photo of Julie having a big slice of cheesecake at a restaurant. In the comments, Julie wrote that she "hardly ever" follows her diabetic diet. Shannon wants to know what she should do. Marcie replies that Shannon should encourage her friend to follow her diet, telling her that diabetics who don't monitor what they eat can end up in a coma in the hospital.

After Shannon leaves, Marcie looks up Julie's chart. It shows that she was in the office just a few weeks ago. Her blood tests were a bit abnormal then, but Julie had said it was just a "one-time slip-up" and that she usually followed her diet. Looking back further, test results suggest that Julie has been mostly adherent to her diet.

What should Marcie do now? Was Julie telling the truth about her (lack of) diet adherence on Instagram and were the abnormal lab values part of that change? Or was she just kidding around, and is she really following her diet? Marcie feels she can't ignore this information and has to find the truth soon. Julie's next appointment with her isn't for several months – which would be fine if she's really following her diet. But if she isn't, she could develop some serious complications by then. Marcie looks for another reason to justify getting Julie into the office in the next week or so, but she doesn't find any.

Study questions:

1. How could Marcie find out the truth from Julie, her patient, without revealing that her daughter, Shannon, is the source of the information? Is this what she should try to do?
2. Alternatively, should she ask Shannon to spy on Julie's food choices? What would be the moral issues involved here?
3. Do doctors simply have responsibilities to recommend healthy courses of action to their patients, or do they have responsibilities to make sure that patients are following their recommendations? Would things be different if Shannon discovered evidence that Julie had been neglecting to take her prescribed insulin injections, rather than simply following an unwise diet for a diabetic?
4. Under what circumstances, if any, should patients have the right to ignore their doctor's recommendations?