

Case 6: Visiting Mr. X

Mr. X is a 75-year-old white male with lung cancer that has spread to his bones and spine. He is living in his own home and his wife of 50 years is trying to provide care for him. Because he is expected to die within six months, he has begun to receive hospice care. The hospice team — which includes a nurse, a social worker, a chaplain, and a hospice aide — have all met him and are working to try to keep him as comfortable as possible. He is a man of few words and has very little to say to the nurse or social worker, and he has told the chaplain that he really doesn't need any spiritual help.

The hospice aide on the team is assigned to visit Mr. X three times per week to assist him with showering. When the aide first arrives, Mr. X is rude and uncooperative. After the aide leaves, the supervisor receives a call from Mr. X's wife. She requests a different aide for future home visits, as it seems to Mr. X and his wife that the aide does not understand their needs. The supervisor listens, agreeing to make a change; sometimes, personalities clash and an arrangement just isn't a good fit.

The second aide makes a visit. Again the patient is very rude, this time directing racial slurs toward the aide. This aide completes her work and goes home. She dreads the next visit, but decides not to say anything to her supervisor. Two days later, the aide finds Mr. X even more vocal. He asks her why the agency is sending such horrible people to care for him, and he continues to use racial slurs and other inappropriate language.

After this visit, the aide calls her supervisor and explains the situation from her perspective. At almost the same time, Mr. X's wife calls and again requests a different aide. The supervisor asks why they are making this request. The wife repeatedly says that the aides sent so far did not seem to understand her husband.

Both aides assigned to the home of Mr. X are African-American. The supervisor suspects, especially after hearing from the second aide, that the patient is racist. Through further investigation, the supervisor finds that Mr. X had used the same language with his first aide, but the aide was afraid that if she complained, she might lose her job.

The supervisor does not want to condone such abusive behavior toward staff, but she also does not want to change aide assignments because of race. She is also concerned that such behavior may be tolerated because of fears over job security.

Study questions:

1. What is the appropriate thing for the supervisor to do?
2. How tolerant should healthcare workers be of patients' disrespectful or offensive speech or behavior? Does the fact that a patient is elderly or dying make a difference here?
3. Suppose Mr. X is in fact racist. Would it be ethical to assign a white aide to him for this reason?

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