THE AMERICAN BOARD OF ANESTHESIOLOGY, INC.

A Member Board of the American Board of Medical Specialties

Advancing the Highest Standards of the Practice of Anesthesiology

Commentary (May 2014)

Anesthesiologists and Capital Punishment

The majority of states in the United States authorize capital punishment, and nearly all states utilize lethal injection as the means of execution. However, this method of execution is not always straightforward (1), and, therefore, some states have sought the assistance of anesthesiologists (2).

For decades the American Medical Association (AMA) has been opposed to physician involvement in capital punishment on the grounds that physicians are members of a profession dedicated to preserving life when there is hope of doing so (3). Effective February 15, 2010, the American Board of Anesthesiology (ABA) has incorporated the AMA Code of Medical Ethics, Opinion E-2.06 (June 2000), regarding physician participation in capital punishment into its own professional standing policy. Specifically, it is the ABA's position that an anesthesiologist should not participate in an execution by lethal injection and that violation of this policy is inconsistent with the Professional Standing criteria required for ABA Certification and Maintenance of Certification in Anesthesiology or any of its subspecialties. As a consequence, ABA certificates may be revoked if the ABA determines that a diplomate participates in an execution by lethal injection (4). What constitutes participation is clearly defined by the AMA's policy.

The ABA has not taken this action because of any position regarding the appropriateness of the death penalty. Anesthesiologists, like all physicians and all citizens, have different personal opinions about capital punishment. Nonetheless, the ABA, like the AMA, believes strongly that physicians should not be involved in capital punishment. The American Society of Anesthesiologists has also supported the AMA's position in this regard (5), as have others including the American Nurses Association (ANA) and National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians (NAEMT). (6,7,8).

Patients should never confuse the death chamber with the operating room, lethal doses of execution drugs with anesthetic drugs, or the executioner with the anesthesiologist. Physicians should not be expected to act in ways that violate the ethics of medical practice, even if these acts are legal. Anesthesiologists are healers, not executioners.

In conclusion, the ABA's policy on capital punishment is intended to uphold the highest standards of medical practice and encourage anesthesiologists and other physicians to honor their professional obligations to patients and society.

Sincerely,

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8. NAEMT position statement on EMT and Paramedic Participation in Capital Punishment, June 9, 2006.