

Portraits in Professionalism: When Radiologists Break the Law

Richard B. Gunderman MD, PhD

The study of crime begins with the knowledge of oneself. All that you despise, all that you loathe, all that you reject, all that you condemn and seek to convert by punishment springs from you. -- Henry Miller

Discussions of professionalism in radiology often focus on ethical principles, codes of conduct, and specific topics such as conflicts of interest and sexual harassment. Although such discussions are helpful, another important domain of professionalism often receives little or no attention: unprofessional conduct that results in prison sentences.

Although most radiologists would hope and perhaps even assume that such conduct is absent from the field, this is not the case. In the past few years, radiologists have pled guilty to bribery, fraudulent billing, unlawful prescribing of controlled substances, and submitting fraudulent expense reports, among other infractions. Such offenses illuminate the psychology of wrongdoing.

If more details about such cases were shared, it would be apparent that financial success, a good professional reputation, and affiliation with august institutions do not immunize radiologists against ethical lapses. If anything, it is quite possible that such attributes represent risk factors, conferring on potential wrongdoers a sense of being better than everyone else.

Reviewing such cases, we need to avoid the presumption that wrongdoers are fundamentally different from everyone else. Each of us naturally prefers to suppose that we are cut from a

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completely different cloth, but many individuals convicted of crimes report that they have long thought exactly the same of themselves.

A common factor in many cases of wrongdoing seems to be a sense that the victims of such infractions—“the government,” for example—are far removed from the perpetrator and the people the perpetrator cares about. Anyone might attempt to rationalize such conduct on the grounds that no particular person is going to suffer. It becomes even more likely if the perpetrator is nursing a grudge.

Of course, there are also perpetrators who express no remorse, even for victims they know personally. Some of these individuals may harbor sociopathic tendencies, but often they are just extraordinarily self-controlled and determined people who manage to convince themselves that they are doing nothing wrong. Some even claim they are doing the system a favor by exposing its weaknesses.

To protect ourselves and our colleagues from such temptations and to foster a robust culture of professionalism, we need to take several steps. First, we need to acknowledge as a community as openly as possible that lapses have occurred, then take the time to understand precisely what happened, including both the how and the why of such cases.

Maintaining a culture of silence does nothing to capitalize on the lessons such cases offer for better calibrating the moral compasses of radiologists. For example, we need to understand that most such lapses spring not from midnight “sell your soul” encounters with a prince of darkness, but from small and even seemingly innocuous infractions that gradually snowball over time.

Second, we need to create organizational and professional cultures that resist the temptation to define success in financial terms. When the dollars become paramount, fudging the rules can

seem a quite justifiable balancing of benefits and risks. By contrast, when dedication to high ethical and professional principles takes precedence, such calculations become less likely.

One way to foster such a culture is to talk explicitly about radiologists we admire, how their dedication to high principles manifested itself in decision-making throughout their careers, and the important differences their efforts to uphold high ideals turned out to have made in the end. The advantages of large sums of money seem obvious, but the benefits of goodness require elucidation.

Third, we need to ensure that discussions around professionalism extend beyond how to get radiologists to comply with policies, procedures, and codes of ethics. A compliance culture seems to locate all responsibility for discerning the difference between right and wrong with the organization, exempting the consciences of individual professionals from the conversation.

Virtue exists not in systems of laws and rules but in the hearts of professionals, whose characters represent the crucial locus of goodness. Simply put, a profession can be no better than its best members. To build a truly robust culture of professionalism, we need to draw professionals into the conversations that help them to clarify who they want to be and why.

Finally, cases of radiologists who have broken the law convey an insight best expressed by Alexander Solzhenitsyn: the line dividing good from evil passes not between two camps of human beings, the good and the evil, but through the heart of every single person. To promote professionalism at its best, we need not only vigilance but also a hefty dose of humility.