

# Fundamental Ethical Principles in Sports Medicine



Brian M. Devitt, MD, FRSC

## KEYWORDS

- Ethics • Sports medicine • Deontology • Utilitarianism • Autonomy
- Virtuous practice

## KEY POINTS

- The practice of ethics in sports medicine is challenging because a doctor-patient-team triad often replaces the traditional doctor-patient relationship.
- For many ethical dilemmas, there are no right answers, but knowledge of the principles and exposure to the practice of ethics are helpful in making sound decisions.
- The value of an athlete is never merely instrumental, and athletes should be regarded as ends in themselves, not means.
- Medical personnel may have passion for a sport but must show dispassion in the execution of their medical duties and always demonstrate professional conduct.
- Player autonomy is crucial in sports medicine: “do not abdicate your responsibility to the individual player.”

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics at its simplest is the study of what makes a particular action in a particular circumstance the right thing to do. In sports medicine, the practice of ethics presents many unique challenges because of the unusual clinical environment of caring for players within the context of a team whose primary goal is to win.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the traditional doctor-patient relationship is often distorted or absent. A doctor-patient-team triad frequently exists, which creates a scenario in which the team's priority can conflict with or even supplant the doctor's primary obligation to player well-being.<sup>2</sup> As such, the customary ethical norms that govern most forms of clinical practice, such as patient confidentiality and autonomy, are not easily translated into sports medicine.

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OrthoSport Victoria, Level 5 Epworth Hospital, 89 Bridge Road, Melbourne, Victoria 3121, Australia

*E-mail address:* [bdevitt@hotmail.com](mailto:bdevitt@hotmail.com)

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Sports doctors are frequently under intense pressure to keep athletes on the field of play and improve performance. This burden, whether implicit or explicit, from management, coaches, trainers, and agents, may compel medical personnel to opt for short-term solutions to injury rather than consider the long-term sequelae of such decisions.<sup>3</sup> A variety of ethical dilemmas may be encountered, and for many of these dilemmas, there are no unique right answers. Several ethical approaches have been proposed to deal with the wide range of complex and challenging ethical problems faced in Medicine; these may be broadly classified into the following areas:

- Deontology
- Utilitarianism
- Principles Approach
- Virtuous Practice

No single approach provides the solution to every ethical issue, and quite often these ethical standpoints conflict with each other. A detailed understanding of each of these ethical philosophies is probably not necessary in most cases. However, an awareness of the core concepts is extremely useful in sports medicine to provide a framework for decision-making and ethical practice.

In this article, these ethical approaches and how they relate to sports medicine are discussed. In doing so, a comparison is made between some of the more contrasting ethical standpoints. Also, several clinical vignettes are included to illustrate certain ethical dilemmas. To conclude, a list of guidelines has been drawn up to offer some support to doctors facing an ethical quandary. The most important guideline is “do not abdicate your responsibility to the individual player.”

## **SPORT AND THE HISTORY OF ETHICS IN SPORTS MEDICINE**

Sport plays an integral role in society and naturally serves as a vehicle for education, health, leadership, and fair play. One of the core principles of sport is fairness, which can be used as a metaphor for behavior in everyday life. The true ethos of sport is epitomized in an informal motto of the Olympic games: “The most important thing is not to win but to take part!” However, whether this ethos is adhered to depends on how the sport is managed, taught, and practiced.

Sport has clearly become a global enterprise as well as a recreation for billions.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, athletes can demand lucrative sponsorship contracts and appearance fees. Recently, Floyd Mayweather topped the Forbes list of the highest paid athletes in sport, earning \$US300 million in a single year, more than double the previous high for an athlete.<sup>5</sup> As the commercialization of sport increases, the value of victory in monetary terms has never been greater. Accordingly, the pressure on athletes to win has increased considerably as have the demands on sports-medicine doctors to facilitate this success by whatever means.

There has long been an adversarial relationship between sporting performance and patient welfare, which stretches back to early Greek and Roman civilization. Aelius Galenus, regarded as one of the forefathers of sports medicine, served as a physician to the gladiators in Pergamum in AD 157. He argued vehemently against the immoderate lifestyle of athletes and their obsession with victory, which he believed was unhealthy and potentially dangerous behavior.<sup>6</sup> He saw himself as both a physician and a philosopher, and he believed the 2 were integrally linked, which he outlined in a small treatise he wrote called, “That the Best Physician Is Also a Philosopher.”<sup>7</sup> His theories have dominated and influenced Western medical science for well over a millennium.

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