Should Tobacco Companies Pay The Price of Medical Ethics? By Mohamad Karim Kechli

It was reported in the top stories of BBC news reports that “six major US tobacco companies have defeated a lawsuit by hospitals seeking compensation for treating patients with smoking-related illnesses.” In this article the issue at stake was that hospitals in the state of Missouri were treating patients with smoking related causes that were not insured and the patients would eventually not pay the bill, thus 37 hospitals sewed the tobacco companies for 455 million dollars. The hospitals lost since there claim that “tobacco companies manipulated the nicotine content in cigarettes and misrepresented the health effects of smoking” was refuted by the judge. The hospitals said that “medical ethics required them to treat people in need, regardless of their ability to pay.” ("Us tobacco firms," 2011)

This issue has important implications in medical ethics. Who is to blame? What is the right ethical thing to do? Tobacco affects millions of people’s health and the medical costs are tremendous on hospitals if the hospitals are treating non-insured patients. Unfortunately not all hospitals do that, and the patient has to suffer the consequences of chronic smoking. Can we really blame the tobacco companies for the “burdens” of medical ethics? In this situation beneficence of the patient is the main issue at stake. Let’s suppose that in the coming few years those same hospitals had overwhelming costs on these patients, than can they just refuse to treat them? Can they say that tobacco companies can now be held responsible for treating those patients and providing there costs? Can we reach one day were the balance between Medical ethical duty and “costs” of this duty brakes?

Comparing this scenario to another ethical situation makes a compelling picture. When the obstetrician is faced with an alcoholic mother that has no insurance and the baby will have alcohol baby syndrome, does he sew the mother or the alcohol companies for the hospital costs of such patients? His duty is to treat, provide care, and not to judge, since what matters here is the baby’s and the mother’s health. In the articles situation the hospitals are required to treat the patients with tobacco related health problems and not to reach a point where ethics has a price that cannot be handled.

When talking about the Swiss cheese model of medical errors in hospital settings, can’t we extrapolate it to a wider spectrum including tobacco companies? On top of the cheese the biggest hole is the tobacco companies selling tobacco, then the second hole is the people who smoke, third is the people who continue to become chronic smokers, 4th is the medical hospitals who care for the patients with those chronic effects of tobacco. In the end if we want to blame anyone for the costs of medical ethics we have all those 4 overlapping holes in the Swiss cheese of medical responsibility. So instead of blaming tobacco companies and sewing for costs, work to provide best care, benefiting the patient, encourage them to stop smoking and work on a Swiss cheese framework.
Reference:

Us tobacco firms win Missouri hospitals case. (2011, April 30). BBC.