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Strikes by physicians: a historical perspective toward an ethical evaluation

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Abstract

Current conditions surrounding the house of medicine-including corporate and government cost-containment strategies, increasing market-penetration schemes in health care, along with clinical scrutiny and the administrative control imposed under privatization by managed care firms, insurance companies, and governments-have spurred an upsurge in physician unionization, which requires a revisiting of the issue of physician strikes. Strikes by physicians have been relatively rare events in medical history. When they have occurred, they have aroused intense debate over their ethical justification among professionals and the public alike, notwithstanding what caused the strikes. As physicians and other health care providers increasingly find employment within organizations as wage-contract employees and their work becomes more highly rationalized, more physicians will join labor organizations to protect both their economic and their professional interests. As a result, these physicians will have to come to terms with the use of the strike weapon. On the surface, many health care strikes may not ever seem justifiable, but in certain defined situations a strike would be not only permissible but an ethical imperative. With an exacerbation of labor strife in the health sector in many nations, it is crucial to explore the question of what constitutes an ethical physician strike.

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