

MEDICAL JOUSTING: A SILENT THREAT TO PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY IN HEALTHCARE

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Introduction

The healthcare profession is built on pillars of trust, teamwork, and respect. However, an alarming practice known as medical jousting—the act of making derogatory remarks about a colleague's work—threatens these fundamental values. While constructive criticism and second opinions are essential to medical practice, the use of dismissive or competitive remarks can damage reputations, lower morale, and ultimately impact patient care. This article explores the causes, implications, and preventative measures surrounding medical jousting, advocating for professionalism and unity in the medical field.

What is Medical Jousting?

Historically, jousting referred to a medieval sport where knights engaged in combat to demonstrate their superiority. In modern healthcare, medical jousting has evolved into verbal combat—where doctors criticize or undermine the competence of their colleagues, often in front of patients, hospital staff, or the public. This practice can manifest as casual remarks, skeptical questioning, or outright disparagement of another physician's diagnosis, treatment plan, or clinical judgment.

Why Does Medical Jousting Occur?

Medical jousting is often driven by:

- Professional jealousy – Some physicians may feel threatened by a colleague's success or patient volume.
- Differences in medical approach – Variations in training, experience, or specialty may lead to criticism of different treatment modalities.
- Ego and competition – The highly competitive nature of medicine can sometimes foster an environment where individuals attempt to elevate themselves by diminishing others.
- Lack of awareness – Some practitioners may not realize the negative impact of their words and assume they are merely offering a valid critique.

How Does It Manifest?

Medical jousting can be both subtle and overt. It often takes the form of rhetorical questions or dismissive remarks such as:

- "Why wasn't an X-ray taken?"
- "Did the attending doctor get a second opinion before proceeding?"
- "If I had handled this case, I would have done things differently."
- "This scar could have been avoided with a better surgical technique."

Such comments not only undermine trust in the original physician but can also create anxiety for the patient and family, leading them to doubt their care team unnecessarily.

Consequences of Medical Jousting

The repercussions of medical jousting extend beyond professional relationships and can have serious ethical and legal consequences:

1. Erosion of Patient Trust – Patients rely on their healthcare providers to work collaboratively. Disparaging remarks about another physician can lead to uncertainty, hesitation, and an erosion of confidence in medical decisions.
2. Disruption of Teamwork – Healthcare is a multidisciplinary effort requiring seamless coordination. Persistent criticism can lead to workplace toxicity and reluctance to collaborate.
3. Ethical Violations – The Medical Council of India (MCI) and other global medical ethics guidelines emphasize mutual respect among practitioners. Conducting consultations with rivalry, insincerity, or criticism violates professional codes of conduct.
4. Legal Implications – Physicians engaging in medical jousting may find their remarks used as evidence in malpractice lawsuits. In some cases, such statements can be perceived as defamation or misconduct.

Preventing Medical Jousting: A Call for Professionalism

To foster a culture of respect and professionalism, the medical fraternity must take deliberate steps to curb medical jousting:

- Encourage Constructive Feedback – Criticism should be evidence-based, respectful, and conducted in a private, professional setting. Disagreements should be addressed through appropriate channels rather than in front of patients.
- Promote Ethical Training – Medical ethics and professional decorum should be integral parts of medical education and training. Physicians must be reminded that colleagues are allies, not adversaries.
- Strengthen Team Collaboration – Encouraging open discussions, interdepartmental meetings, and peer reviews can help physicians understand different perspectives without resorting to criticism.
- Focus on Patient-Centered Care – Physicians must prioritize patient well-being over personal rivalries. Unity within the medical community ensures better outcomes and fosters trust.

Conclusion

Medical jousting is an avoidable yet harmful practice that threatens the integrity of the healthcare profession. While open discussions and second opinions are crucial, they must be conducted ethically and professionally to maintain trust, collaboration, and excellence in patient care. The medical community must recognize the long-term consequences of internal conflicts and collectively strive for an environment of respect, teamwork, and continuous learning.

By fostering a culture of mutual support and ethical dialogue, the medical profession can uphold its highest standards and ensure that patients receive the best possible care—free from bias, rivalry, or unnecessary doubt.

