

## The Role of the Doctor

The role of the doctor as healer of the sick remains core to the practice of medicine. However, over time the practice of the doctor has changed, broadening to include the prevention of disease as well as advocacy for and partnership with our patients. The work we do is now based mostly on scientific evidence and the methods by which we care are, in many cases, clearly defined by established guidelines. With the development of clear pathways of care, many of the tasks formerly carried out solely by the doctor are now performed by any one of a number of other professionals. This has led to a blurring of professional boundaries but also helps to define what is specific about the role of the doctor.

The doctor, uniquely, is the healthcare professional who holds ultimate responsibility for the patient under their care, obtaining and analysing information regarding the patient's condition or that of the population for which they care, diagnosing and deciding, along with the patient(s) where possible, what is the best course of treatment, if any, to follow: prevention, cure, long-term control, palliation or none.

In many situations in which the doctor finds themselves, uncertainty will likely exist and it is the role of the doctor to understand this; to make decisions on care based on sound ethical principles using personal knowledge and skills, evidence and scientific training; and by consulting with colleagues or seniors where necessary, bearing in mind that the right course of action might be to deviate from the standard pathway, sometimes even to develop or trial new therapies and sometimes to do nothing but offer explanation and support.

Along with all healthcare professionals, to underpin their role the doctor must have a sound and up-to-date knowledge of the underlying scientific principles and approaches to medical care, an understanding of the professional responsibilities that make patient care paramount, the necessary skills for their role, and a willingness to share their knowledge with those practitioners and students alongside whom they discharge their professional responsibility.

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