

Occupational Health Ethics

Jacques Tamin

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From Theory to Practice



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Jacques Tamin
Centre for Occupational
and Environmental Health
University of Manchester
Manchester, UK

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother Sylvio (1959–2017) who practiced medicine and occupational health with the highest moral integrity, most ethical behavior and deepest compassion.

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Prologue

I got to know Elsie (name changed to preserve anonymity) quite well in the last year of her life. I saw her in my occupational health clinics, during her brief periods of remission. She had battled metastatic cancer with courage and fortitude. She knew her prognosis was poor. She had been a ward clerk in the hospital for nearly 40 years. She was immensely proud of that service, and the small contribution (as she humbly saw it) she made to patient welfare. Her hope was to return to work once she was strong enough, and to end her working life “on a high note”.

After endless courses of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, there was a time when she became well enough for us to plan a gradual return to work. She was overjoyed at the prospect, and so grateful for the chance of a final few months in the job she loved. She would soon be reaching retirement age but did not really want to retire.

I agreed on a “return to work” date with her manager, her general practitioner and treating specialists. I had planned a review shortly after her resumption. We planned to gradually increase her working hours, depending on how she coped with her residual fatigue. However, she failed to turn up for that review appointment, which was unusual. She *never* missed appointments. We tried to contact her, but her manager told us she had not attended work. We later received a call from a Human Resources (HR) manager to tell us she was no longer employed. She had had a deterioration a few days before she was due to resume. That had triggered the final stage of the HR attendance policy. He had visited her at home and terminated her employment!

I was distraught. I knew what this would have meant to her, especially that she would have felt such shame in being dismissed from work in this way. We finally managed to speak to her husband. He thanked us for our concern and our support during her illness. Elsie had died the day after she was sacked.

More than twenty years later, the memory of Elsie’s pride in her contribution at work and the crushing blow of losing her job are still with me. Her story also reminds me that what we do, as occupational health professionals, matters in ways that are hard to quantify.

In a world where organizations place increasing emphasis on efficiency and productivity, values such as dignity and fairness may not feature highly. In the workplace, occupational health professionals have amongst their listed duties, “respecting human dignity” (ICOH 2014). I hope we always strive to respect the human dignity of those who can be at their most vulnerable. We may not always be successful, but we should not stop trying.

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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome
BMA	British Medical Association
BMJ	British Medical Journal
CA	Capability Approach
DOI	Digital Object Identifier
DPR	Doctor-Patient Relationship
EPP	Exposure-Prone Procedure
ERATOH	Ethics Reflection and Audit Tool in Occupational Health
ERATOM	Ethics Reflection and Audit Tool in Occupational Medicine
ESMPH	European Society for Philosophy of Medicine and Health Care
FFW	Fitness For Work
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
GMC	General Medical Council
GNP	Gross National Product
GP	General Practitioner
H&S	Health and Safety
HAWS	Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome
HCW	Health Care Worker
HDI	Human Development Index
HIV	Human Immuno-deficiency Virus
HR	Human Resources
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
IC	Informed Consent
ICOH	International Commission on Occupational Health
IHR	Ill-Health Retirement
IRMP	Independent Registered Medical Practitioner
IT	Information Technology
MR	Management Referral
NHS	National Health Service
NWAG	North West Audit Group

OH	Occupational Health
OHP	Occupational Health Professional
OM	Occupational Medicine
PEP	Post-Exposure Prophylaxis
PH	Public Health
PTD	Permission To Disclose
RIDDOR	Reporting of Injuries, Disease and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (UK)
UJIH-SC	Unemployment, Job Insecurity and Health Scientific Committee (of ICOH)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US/USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation
WRFQ	Work Role Functioning Questionnaire
WRS	Work-Related Stress