



Good Work and Ethics Applied to the OR: Lessons from Musician Yo-Yo Ma

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Change in US health care is at its apogee. The term *future shock*, described by Alvin Toffler as too much change in too short a time,¹ defines the past decade of my surgical practice and the recent experience of most health care professionals. Gone are the days of the tyrannical surgeon, filled with hubris, pontificating to intimidated surgical team members. Surgical and nursing educations have changed, diversity and ethical training now complement clinical training, mutual respect is promoted, and hospitals and ORs are held to higher standards and more regulation than at any other time in history.²

The entire OR team, not any single surgeon, is the unit responsible for administering excellent, patient-focused surgical care, and the team's overarching common goal is to perform good, ethical work at all times. Achieving a high level of patient care represents a challenge for all health care professionals who must attempt to reconcile sometimes ambiguous or divergent interpretations of ethical work. Merging practitioners with individual goals and skills into a team with common goals and excellent skills requires effort and perseverance on everyone's part.

For guidance in achieving the lofty aims of performing to high standards, health care professionals can familiarize themselves with the work of the humanitarian, globe-trotting musical

virtuoso and teacher Yo-Yo Ma.³ Yo-Yo Ma combines the traits of modesty, amiability, and collegial spirit with an extraordinary musical talent. His work exemplifies quality and professional ethical obligation.³ He educates young people about music and allows them to participate in its creation. His work has earned him recognition and awards throughout the world, including acknowledgment from *Smithsonian Magazine* in 2005 as one of "35 who made a difference."⁴ His work bridges many cultures, and he has been named a culture connect ambassador by the US Department of State.³

When Howard Gardner of Harvard University asked Yo-Yo Ma what he considered to be good work, the gifted musician outlined three distinct obligations:

- to perform one's repertoire as excellently as possible;
- to work together with other musicians, particularly under conditions in which one has to proceed rapidly and develop necessary common understandings and trust; and
- to pass on one's knowledge, skills, understanding, and orientation to succeeding generations.⁵

Yo-Yo Ma's personal guidelines can be informative for health care professionals. In the OR, these responsibilities encompass all that the surgical

team is ethically obligated to do to ensure quality care for patients.

PERFORM THE REPERTOIRE

Each day, surgical team members have the opportunity to perform a “repertoire” in the OR, and each is responsible for his or her own performance. An individual’s performance can be mediocre or outstanding. When great musical professionals perform an outstanding repertoire, they know they have performed at their best. If the performance is less than their best, they know, and the other members of the orchestra know. When musical professionals perform poorly, the world knows as well.

In the OR, when members of the health care team perform a surgical procedure to the best of their abilities, they know. If an individual performs at less than his or her best, the team knows immediately, and the efficiency of the entire team suffers. When health care professionals perform poorly, the patient suffers the consequences and may even die as a result. When all members of the health care team perform their operative “repertoire” with excellence, they ensure that the patient receives excellent care.

WORKING TOGETHER

Professional musicians must work together under conditions that are less than ideal, and they must develop trust and common understandings that facilitate the success of the performance. Similarly, health care professionals often must work together in elective and emergency situations where conditions are best defined as controlled chaos. Under these conditions of duress, surgeons, nurses, anesthesia care providers, and OR support staff who may be unfamiliar with each other must quickly develop mutual trust and common under-

standings to deliver the best possible care to the patient. Working together with the goal of providing excellent care in an ethical manner transcends simple teamwork. The goals and objectives in the OR are unequivocal, and the stakes are high, especially for the patient.

PASSING ON THE LEGACY

Most health care professionals invest significant time and resources in learning their craft and subsequently develop a deep passion for their work.

An emotional attachment to one’s work is often a prerequisite for excellence. Yo-Yo Ma exemplifies excellence through his performances; however, in the context of good work and ethics, he

goes further and recognizes his professional responsibility to be a steward of his craft and perpetuate the art as a citizen of the musical community. Since 1998, Yo-Yo Ma has devoted his attention to the Silk Road Project and other initiatives, to celebrate the music of civilizations in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.⁶ His work passes on a legacy of knowledge, skills, understanding, and orientation to succeeding generations so that the music he cherishes can endure long after he leaves the world.

Health care professionals who love their work also have a responsibility to be stewards of their craft and perpetuate the art of caring for patients as citizens of the health care community. This responsibility entails a commitment to life-long learning, training, and professional self-improvement. It also requires advocacy for one’s profession and patients. Most importantly, good work and ethics requires the exemplary act of teaching the next generation of health care professionals the essential knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to perpetuate the art, so the profession and craft can

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endure long after the current generation departs the world. Through good and ethical work, as exemplified by Yo-Yo Ma, patients will receive the care they deserve, and the surgical team members can be proud of their good work. **AORN**

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