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Surgeons' Sleep Deprivation and Patient Safety

Research shows that a surgeon who has been working for 24 hours is impaired as much as a drunk person in thinking and motor function. So should patients have a right to know if their doctor has been up all night?

Yes, say a group of sleep researchers, who argued for full disclosure of sleep deprivation in a **recent article** in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine.

No, **responded the American College of Surgeons**, whose leaders say it should be up to the individual surgeon to decide if he or she is too tired to operate -- or if the surgeon needs to tell the patient before heading to the OR.

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The debate shows that surgeons and hospital administrators are just beginning to consider some basic issues of fatigue and patient safety that in other contexts -- piloting airliners and driving large trucks on interstate highways -- have long been settled.

Surgeons understandably don't want to be subject to the welter of bureaucratic rules that truck drivers and pilots deal with. And patients might not like it either if a surgeon was required to announce that he would be starting their surgery but another doctor would come into finish it because the time would stretch beyond the first doctor's hour limit.

But some sensible limits could easily be put in place. For one, the opportunity for a surgeon to work inhuman hours is created by hospitals who let a surgeon sign up for overnight call, which often results in working all night in the OR, and let the same surgeon schedule elective non-urgent cases for the next day.

Why would a surgeon do this in the first place? The lure of money, as a [number of commenters](#) on the New England Journal of Medicine website candidly admitted. Which raises a problem with the American College of Surgeons' idea that surgeons should be left to their good judgment on when and when not to operate. Anyone who schedules back-to-back call nights with elective cases is not showing good judgment in the first place.

Another issue for patient safety is the surgeon who is well rested but inexperienced, for not having gone through sleepless nights filled with surgical cases. Residency training programs are now starting to limit young surgeons to 16-hour days, which many surgeons say is going to result in a generation of rested but green doctors.

The right of informed consent gives at least one answer to the conundrum. Every patient has a right to know what any reasonable patient would want to know going into a surgery. And since we would all pause before submitting to the knife with a surgeon smelling of alcohol, the same right should apply

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to the less obvious danger of the sleep-deprived surgeon. If a doctor wouldn't want a family member to undergo surgery with that glassy-eyed doctor, then the same right should apply to all patients.

This means patients should be told, and should be given the option of rescheduling or bringing in a fresh replacement to operate. This will be inconvenient for hospital schedulers and may cause some surgeons to lose income. But patients will ultimately be safer for it.

And if hospitals want to minimize patients getting upset for having their plans upended at the last minute, all they have to do is adjust their call schedules to make these up-all-night dilemmas a rare event.

Article first published as [Should Patients Have a Right to Know When Their Surgeon Has Been Up All Night?](#) on Technorati.

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