

The Vitamin D Council

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Barbara A. Gilchrest, M.D.
Chair of the Department of Dermatology
Boston University School of Medicine
Boston University's Commonwealth Medical Group
930 Commonwealth Avenue
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Dear Chairperson Gilchrest:

Principle five of the American Medical Associations' Principles of Medical Ethics states:

A physician shall continue to study, apply, and advance scientific knowledge, maintain a commitment to medical education, make relevant information available to patients, colleagues, and the public, obtain consultation, and use the talents of other health professionals when indicated.

In April of 2004, you took successful steps to remove Professor Michael Holick from his professorship in dermatology at Boston University School of Medicine because he advocated sensible sun exposure in order to ensure adequate 25-hydroxy vitamin D levels. For the reasons listed below, we believe your actions violated the Principles of Medical Ethics. We are not defending Dr. Holick; his intellectual and academic standing is beyond reproach and best attested by the fact that he has been a contributing author to *Harrison's Text Book of Medicine* for the last 20 years.

You were quoted in the Boston Globe as saying you would ask anyone to resign their appointment if they were acting in a way that was "dangerous to the public." In the same article, you were also quoted as saying that vitamin D deficiency "is hardly an epidemic." You went on to say people can get "all the vitamin D they need from eating fish or drinking more milk." [Boston Globe, "BU Advocate of Sunlight Draws Ire," Scott Allen, Boston, MA, 4/13/04]

We have waited six months for you to correct your misstatements, realizing that your schedule may make it difficult for you to keep up with the relevant medical literature. Suffice it to say that dozens of papers in well-known refereed medical journals clearly indicate deaths from a variety of diseases, including cancer, are greatly elevated in those who avoid cutaneous production of vitamin D. Such evidence was recently reviewed in a prominent dermatology research journal. The authors concluded, "**Increasing evidence now indicates that cutaneous vitamin D synthesis is of great importance for the prevention of a broad variety of diseases, including various malignancies.**" [Exp Dermatol. 2004 Dec; 13 (s4):11-15]

Grant recently estimated that more than 21,000 Americans die needles cancer deaths in the USA due inadequate cutaneous production of vitamin D. He said, "**The findings of the current study confirm previous results that solar UV-B radiation is associated with reduced risk of cancer of the breast, colon, ovary, and prostate as well as non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Eight additional malignancies were found to exhibit an inverse correlation between mortality rates and UV-B radiation: bladder, esophageal, kidney, lung, pancreatic, rectal, stomach, and corpus uteri. . . The annual number of premature deaths from cancer due to lower UV-B exposures was 21,700.**" [Cancer. 2002 Mar 15; 94(6):1867-75]

As you are an expert on malignant melanoma, we assume you are aware that the British Journal of Dermatology warned dermatologists about advising against all sun exposure without maintaining adequate vitamin D levels, saying, "**it would seem mandatory to ensure an adequate vitamin D3 status if sun**

exposure were seriously curtailed, certainly in relation to carcinoma of breast, prostate and colon and probably also malignant melanoma.” [Br J Dermatol. 2002 Aug; 147 (2):197-213].

You told the Boston Globe that vitamin D deficiency “is hardly an epidemic,” and can easily be prevented with an adequate diet. We find it difficult to believe you were unaware that the New England Journal of Medicine reported that almost half the patients in Massachusetts General Hospital were vitamin D deficient, in spite of ingesting the recommended amount of vitamin D. The authors ended with an ominous warning: **“Hypovitaminosis D is common . . . including those with vitamin D intakes exceeding the recommended daily allowance and those without apparent risk factors for vitamin D deficiency.”** [N Engl J Med. 1998 Mar 19; 338 (12):777-83].

The Board of Directors of the Vitamin D Council recently concluded we cannot ethically wait any longer for you to educate yourself about the vitamin D steroid hormone system and correct your inaccurate statements. Although we have no evidence, as yet, that you are advising your patients to avoid the sun without ensuring adequate vitamin D levels, the above facts indicate to us that you have not fulfilled the Principles of Medical Ethics. Unless you acquaint yourself with the relevant medical literature and correct your misstatements, we will file a formal complaint against you with the AMA’s Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs for violating the Fifth principle of the Principles of Medical Ethics.

Furthermore, if we obtain evidence that you are advising your patients to avoid the sun without you taking affirmative steps to assure adequate 25-hydroxy vitamin D levels, we will file a complaint against you with the Board of Registration in Medicine of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. If that body decides we have no standing in the matter, we will run advertisements in the Boston Globe, alerting your patients to the medical facts and advising them they may have sustained injury at your hands should they develop any of illnesses known to be associated with insufficient 25-hydroxy vitamin D levels.

Please let us know if this matter can be settled amicably. All we ask is for you to review some of the recent medical literature on the growing epidemic of vitamin D deficiency and act accordingly. The December 2004 issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition has a ninety three page supplemental issue on the vitamin D deficiency epidemic and its devastating consequences [Am J Clin Nutr 2004 80: 1673S-1766S].

We feel you could fulfill your ethical duties by asking the AMA’s Council on Scientific Affairs to examine the issue. Another alternative is to for you to ask the Institute of Medicine’s Food and Nutrition Board to reexamine the issue. At the very least, you could correct your misstatements to the Boston Globe.

The Vitamin D Council cannot stand idly by while so many Americans die needless deaths. Whatever actions you take to satisfy your ethical duties, we must insist that you take steps to “make relevant information available to patients, colleagues, and the public.” Your misstatements are “dangerous to the public.”

Sincerely,

John Jacob Cannell, MD
Executive Director
The Vitamin D Council

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Scott Allen, Boston Globe