

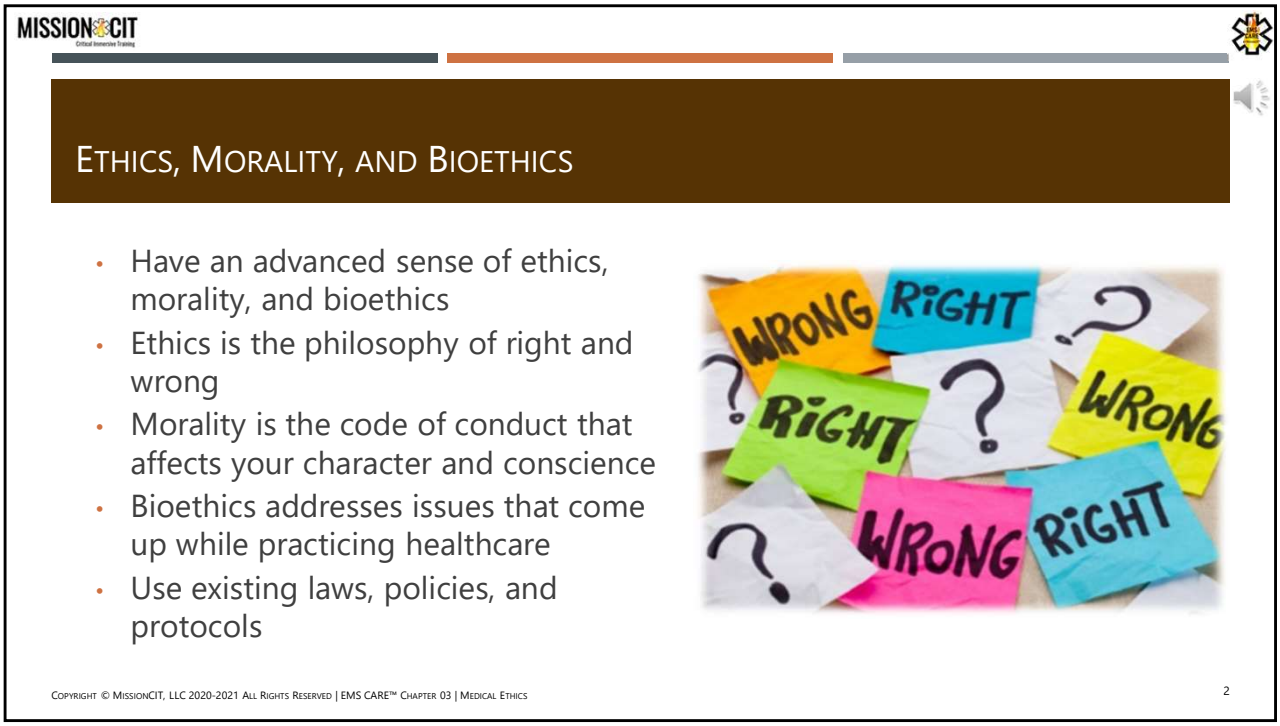


ETHICS FOR PREHOSPITAL CARE

COPYRIGHT © MISSIONCIT, LLC 2020-2021 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED | EMS CARE™ CHAPTER 03 | MEDICAL ETHICS

Thank you, Justin!

So far, we have seen the AMA Code of Medical Ethics and in this lesson, we will look at the ethics that apply to prehospital care.

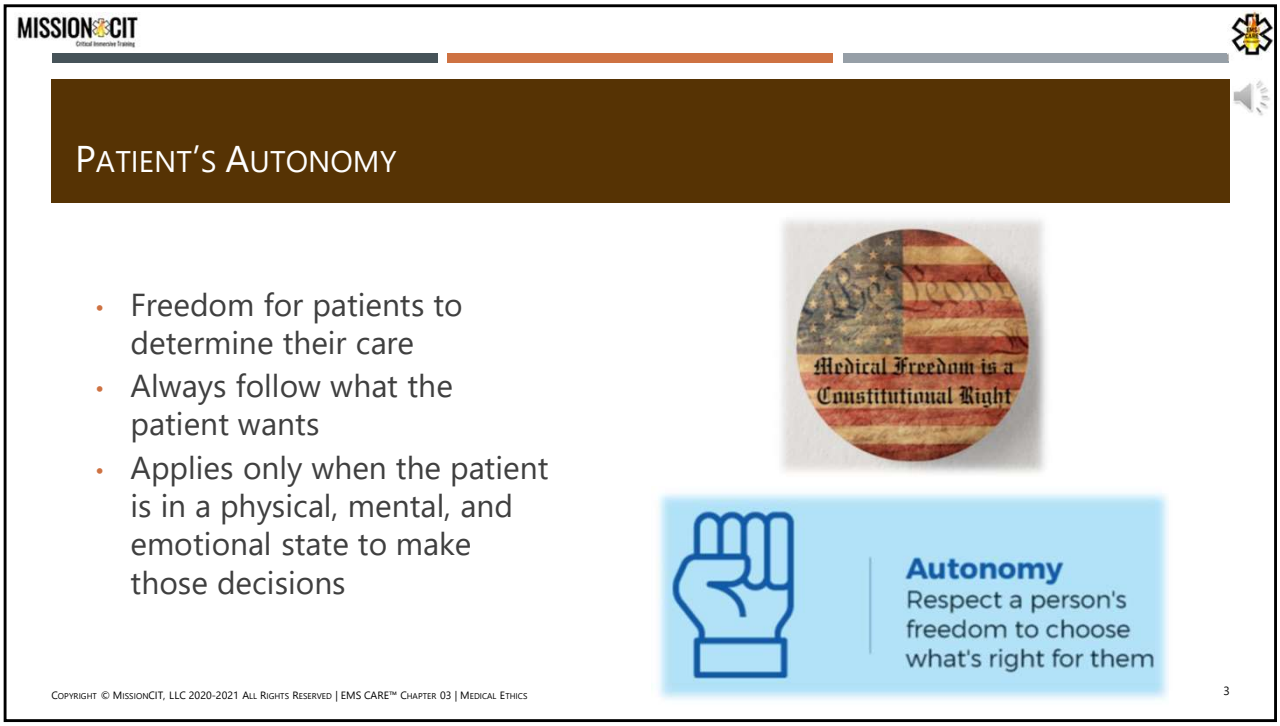


As an EMT, you're expected to have an advanced sense of ethics, morality, and bioethics, and abide by them.

Here, ethics is the philosophy of right and wrong and leads to ideal professional behavior. Morality, on the other hand, is the code of conduct that affects your character and conscience. Finally, bioethics addresses issues that come up while practicing healthcare.

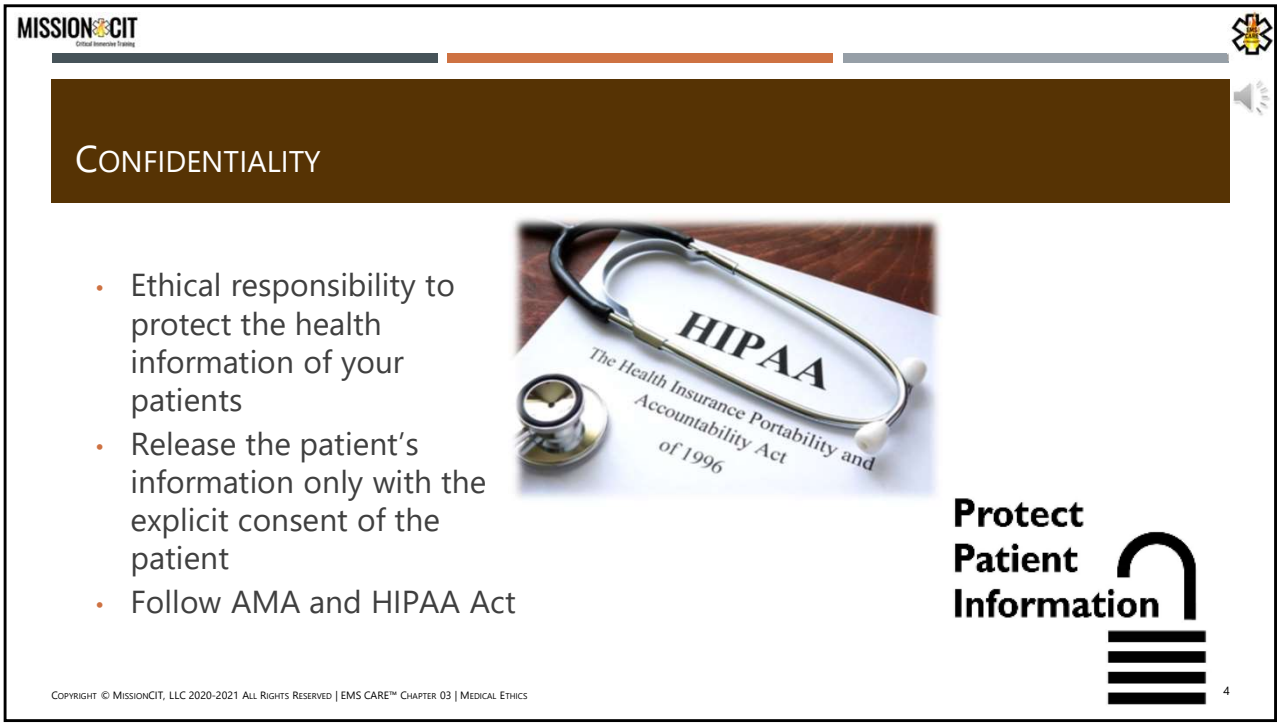
Overall, your profession requires you to evaluate and apply ethical and moral principles and standards while executing your duty. And you can use existing laws, policies, and protocols to guide your decisions and

ensure that they are within the gambit of the required ethical and moral guidelines.



Autonomy is the freedom that patients have to determine their care. As an EMT, you're likely to encounter situations where family members interfere and supersede the wishes of the patient, even when the patient is capable of making decisions. So, what do you do then?

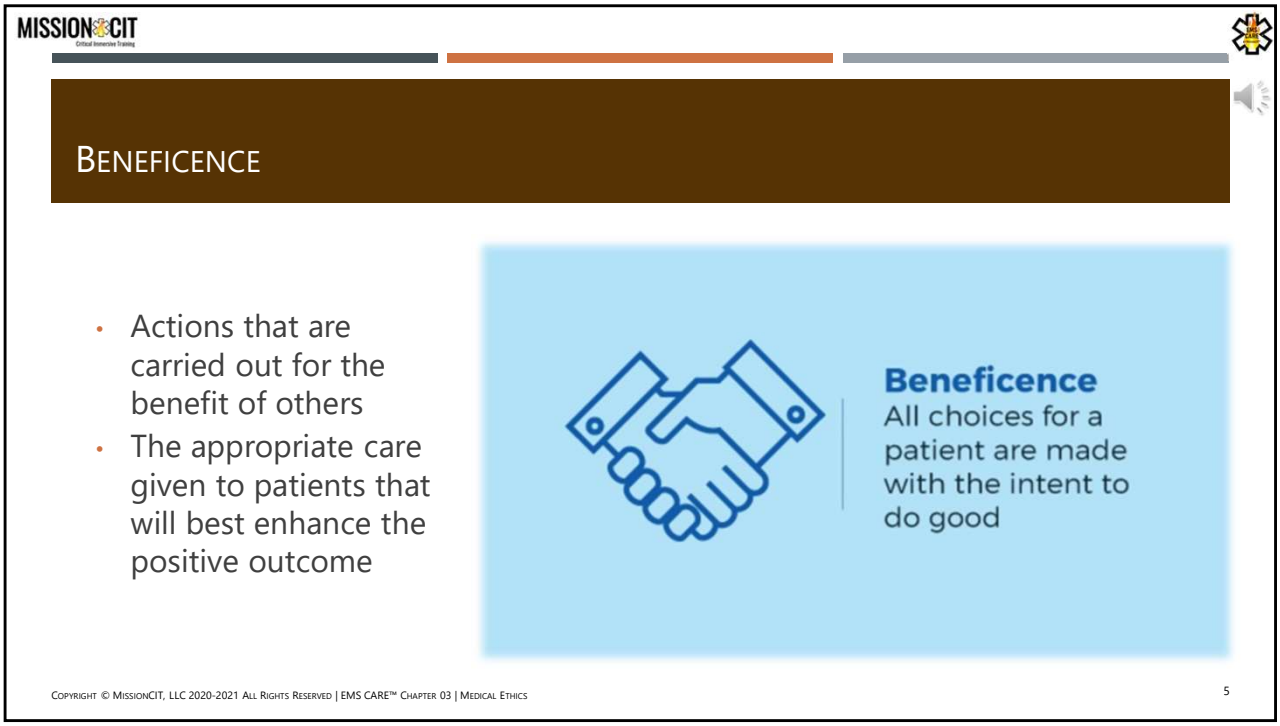
It's really a no-brainer that you have to follow what the patient wants because respecting this freedom is one of your important ethical principles. Of course, this applies only when the patient is in a physical, mental, and emotional state to make those decisions.



Confidentiality is another important aspect of your profession. You have an ethical responsibility to protect the health information of your patients, and this includes history, assessments, medical findings, the treatment choices made by the patient, the treatment provided, and more.

You can release the patient's information only with the explicit consent of the patient. In other words, you can disclose it only when the patient signs a release, the person requesting it submits a legal subpoena, and it is required by the billing professionals.

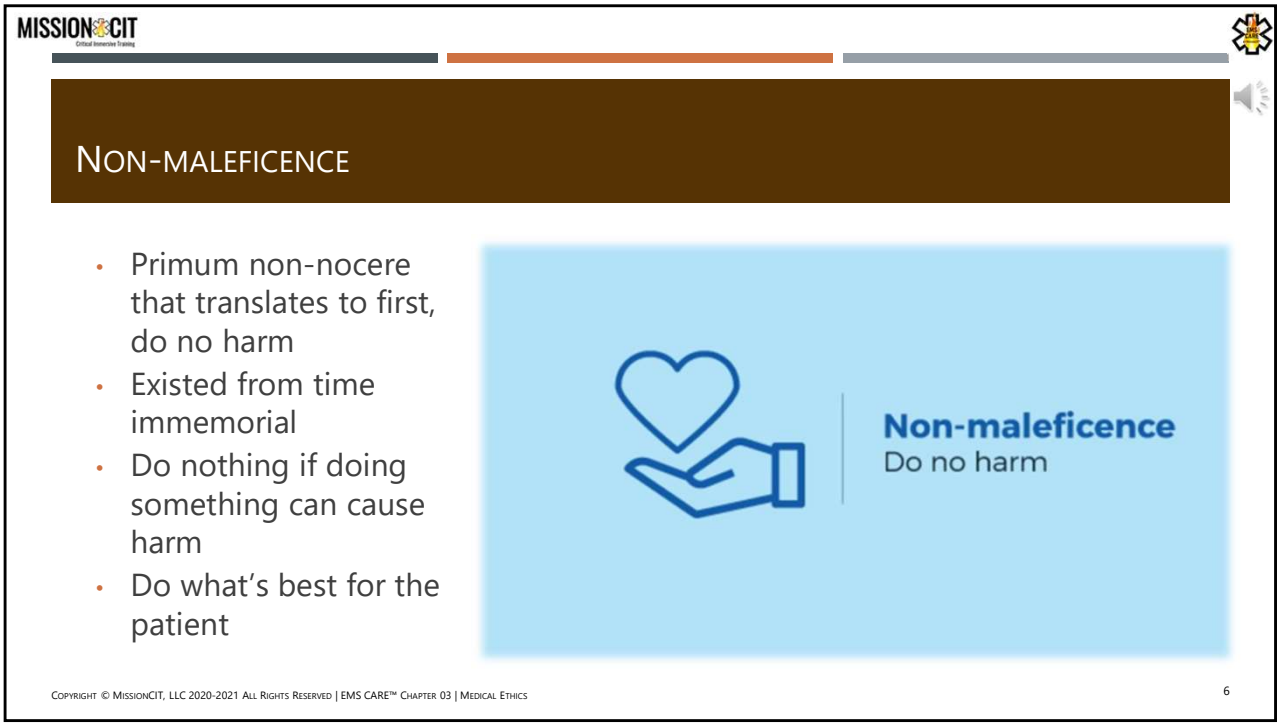
The AMA and HIPAA Act has clearly laid down laws on patient privacy and has also put safeguards in place to protect it at all costs. So, when you violate this confidentiality, you may also attract legal liabilities.



Generally speaking, the word beneficence means the actions that are carried out for the benefit of others. In this context, it means the appropriate care given to patients that will best enhance the positive outcome. For example, doing CPR before transporting a patient is an act of beneficence.

What it essentially means is that you have done action in the best interest of the patient, regardless of how impactful it is on the patient. In the earlier example, even if a patient dies without responding to the CPR, it's still considered an act of beneficence and you are

deemed to have executed your ethical responsibility.



One of the first and original guiding principles of medicine that have existed from time immemorial is Primum non-nocere which translates to first, do no harm. It means if you're faced with a decision between doing nothing and doing something that may cause harm, you must always pick the first option. This is non-maleficence.

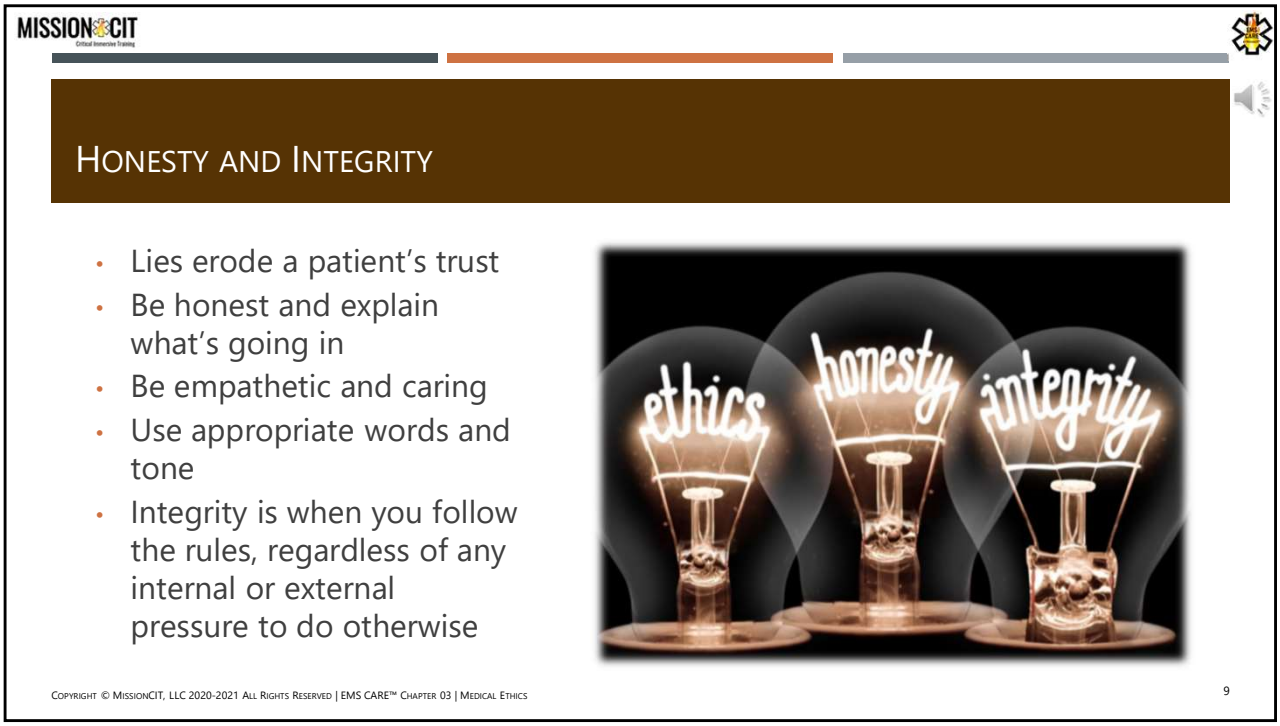
Likewise, if taking no action is likely to be detrimental to a patient, then you must provide appropriate care that can improve the patient's condition.



The ethical principle of justice states that you must provide appropriate care to all patients under your responsibility without discriminating against their skin color, race, language, sex, socioeconomic status, or any other factor. The care must be in tune with what the patient needs to overcome the problem that he or she is undergoing.



Besides just medical care, you must provide basic human dignity and respect for the patient, regardless of the medical condition and the patient's state of affairs. Remember, they are not a piece of cargo that must be transported, rather an individual with emotions and feelings. Hence, make sure you treat every patient well and at the same time, stay on top of your safety as well.

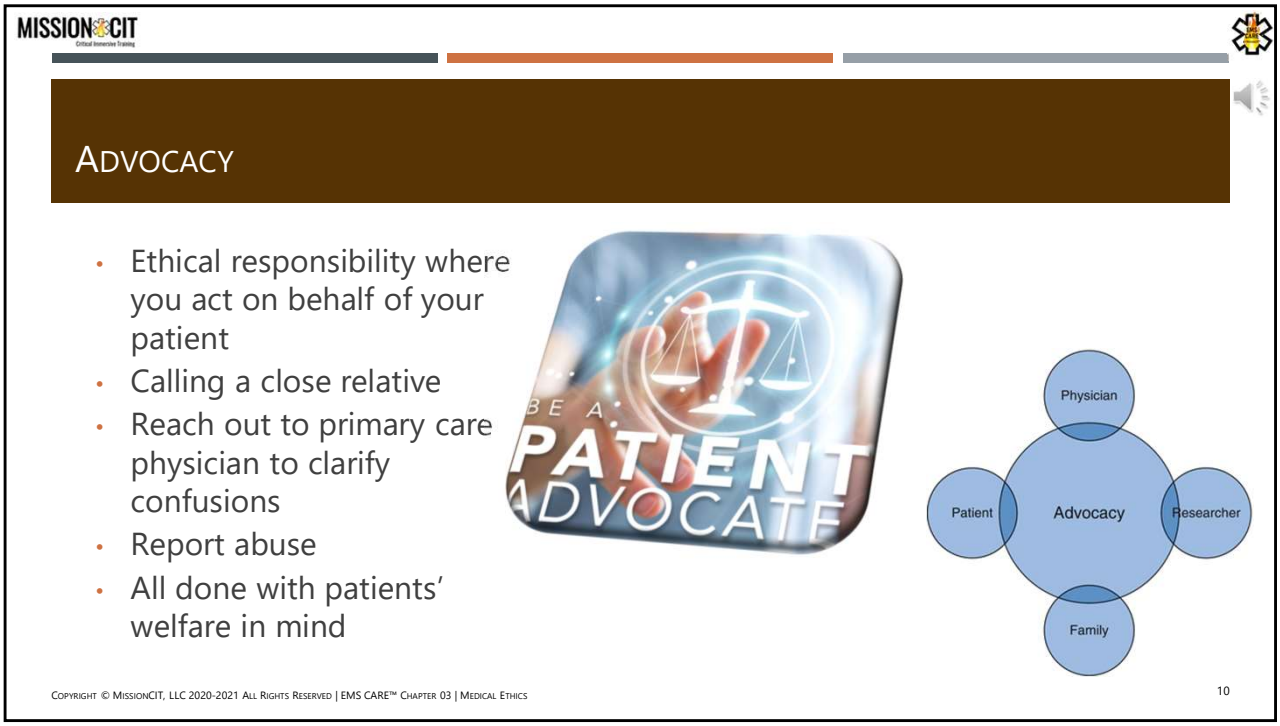


Lies can destroy any relationship including the one you have with your patient. When you lie, you're eroding the trust a patient has in you and this can have disastrous effects on the patient's mental and emotional health. So, be honest and tell the patient what's going on, but at the same time, be empathetic and caring. Use appropriate words and tones to convey what you have to, but without alarming the patient.

Integrity is when you follow the rules, regardless of any internal or external pressure to do otherwise.

This honesty and integrity extend not just to providing

care but also to documenting all that you saw and did. It’s often easy to get overwhelmed by the situation, so be guided by these two important principles of prehospital care.



Advocacy is an ethical responsibility where you act on behalf of your patient. It can be as simple as making a phone call to the closest relative of the patient to inform them of your patient's medical health. It also includes calling the primary care physician to inform him or her and even clarify any confusion about the patient's condition. In some rare cases, you may even have to be the one to report abuse to authorities, so you can free the patient from physical and emotional trauma.

All these are done with the well-being of the patient in mind, so following these basic ethical principles can help

to develop a better relationship between you and your patient.

This brings us to the end of this lesson and in the next one, Justin will take you through the legal aspects.