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Medical-Legal and Ethical Considerations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Purpose:
Covid-19 has presented unprecedented challenges. In addition to those involving treating a potentially deadly disease with little information, medical professionals have also faced ethical and medical-legal dilemmas. Ophthalmologists are no exception.

The purpose of this abstract is to: 1. Provide public health perspectives on how our nation responds to a pandemic and to the regulations and laws that may apply, 2. Discuss the tension between providing individual care vs. population health during COVID-19, 3. Consider ethical and potential Medical-Legal implications of practicing medicine during a crisis, especially as they might involve allocating extremely scarce resources, 4. Discuss the medical professional’s ethical duty to provide care for patients conflicting with a responsibility to protect his/her own health, especially when Personal Protective Equipment is in low supply, 5. Identify some strategies on minimizing Medical-Legal liability, and how best to meet certain ethical challenges.

Methods:
Using real world cases that can occur in an academic ophthalmology practice during COVID-19, we will discuss a few challenging clinical scenarios faced by retina specialists. Professional guidelines from the AAO and ASRS will be used to provide a basis for treatment during COVID-19. In addition, legal sources including regulations, laws, and executive orders will be discussed, along with ethical guidelines including the AMA’s Code of Ethics in a Pandemic.

Results:
We'll provide meeting attendees a detailed presentation and an in-depth discussion on the five goals listed under the Purpose, using available professional guidelines, legal sources and ethical guidelines.

Conclusions:
Retina physicians and surgeons must be able to respond to the urgent and time-sensitive nature of many retinal diseases. During a pandemic, a sweeping measure such as complete office closure is not likely to be realistic, and we may be forced to triage and make decisions that are extraordinary. Raising awareness of these dilemmas and having a plan in place will not only ease our anxiety about the unknowns, it will also maximize readiness response and afford us undivided attention to our patients in times of crisis.