

I n their paper, Are doctors altruistic?, Glannon and Ross advance the unusual, but refreshing, view that it is patients rather than doctors who are altruistic. This they explain by an analysis of both the nature of the doctor-patient relationship and the definition of altruism as an act which is both optional and supererogatory. Thus, while accepting that doctors act to high moral standards and ideals, in their view this is an inevitable concommitant of their fiduciary relationship with their patients, and is thus separate from, although occasionally overlapping with, altruism. However, in supporting their conclusion that it is patients rather than doctors who are altruistic, they place themselves in what I believe is an unnecessary quandary. Their description of the doctor-patient relationship includes the notion that patients too have obligations—to tell doctors the truth, to undertake the recommended therapy, and so on. Thus, they claim, when patients go beyond these obligations by, for example, allowing medical students to examine them as apart of the educational process, they are acting beyond their own obligations and are acting altruistically.

This analysis is, I believe, flawed as well as unnecessary. To be sure, in the ideal world patients will act in the way Glannon and Ross suggest, but they do so out of self interest—not because they have an obligation to do so. Or at least, not an obligation which flows from the nature of the doctor-patient relationship. If there is such an obligation, then it is one owed to themselves. By locating the patient’s relationship with the doctor on a model which they advance. Whether or not patients have obligations to doctors (and other health care workers) to the esteem in which they have traditionally been held. Moreover, the recognition by Glannon and Ross that altruism can indeed be a part of the patient’s relationship with medicine paves the way for a radical reassessment of the doctor-patient relationship. To often, medicine denies the opportunity for altruism—the reports of the Bristol Royal Infirmary inquiry, The Alder Hey inquiry, and the Independent Review Group on the Retention of Organs in Scotland have all pointed to the denial of the opportunity to act altruistically, which has in part caused the suffering of which we are all too well aware. For this reason, if no other, Glannon and Ross’s description of the responsibilities of doctors and the role of patients has much to commend it in current, and future, times.

REFERENCES