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Disclosing Information about the Risk of Inherited Disease

Mrs. Durham was diagnosed with an invasive epithelial ovarian cancer and, in conjunction with conversations about her treatment, was offered genetic testing for the BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations. It was revealed that she carried a harmful BRCA1 mutation that is known to increase the lifetime risk of breast and ovarian cancer significantly. Once the results came back, her oncologist brought up the option of a prophylactic mastectomy and advised her to inform her living relatives of the results of the test.

Mrs. Durham's primary care physician, Dr. Bartlett, expected she would do so, too. At her first appointment after the diagnosis, Dr. Bartlett asked Mrs. Durham how she was holding up and how her sister, Mrs. Weir—her only living family member and also one of Dr. Bartlett's patients—had taken the news.

"Oh. Well, I haven't told her."

"Are you going to?" asked Dr. Bartlett.

Mrs. Durham responded, "You know we haven't spoken in quite some time, and I can't imagine making this the topic of our first conversation."

"Yes, I know ... but I think this is important information that may affect her health."

Mrs. Durham sighed. "We're estranged, for one thing, and for another, I want to keep my cancer private. I don't want people knowing I'm sick and pitying me."

Dr. Bartlett felt pulled in two directions—his obligation to respect Mrs. Durham's wishes and protect her privacy conflicted with his obligation to promote Mrs. Weir's health. BRCA1 mutations are not "reportable" illnesses like HIV and tuberculosis, so he was not compelled by law to break Mrs. Durham's confidentiality. Dr. Bartlett considered how he might be able to encourage Mrs. Durham's sister to be tested for the BRCA mutations while preserving Mrs. Durham's confidentiality.*

Does Mrs. Durham have a moral obligation to inform her sister of the results of the test? Why or why not? For Dr. Bartlett, what moral principles are in conflict? If Mrs. Durham refuses to inform her sister, should Dr. Bartlett tell her? What should Dr. Bartlett do if he can't subtly ask Mrs. Weir to be tested (that is, if he can't ask her without revealing the real reason for his request)?



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