

Suggestions to the American Psychiatric Association for Revisions of the Goldwater Rule

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June 28, 2018

Dear Dr. Everett:

The co-authors of "The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump" respectfully submit these suggestions for a modification of the Goldwater Rule. We see our speaking out on our sense of dangerous psychological unfitness in a public figure as an ethical imperative, not an ethical transgression. We address problematic elements of the expanded Goldwater Rule and propose limited, practical remedies.

“On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention or who has disclosed information about himself/herself through public media. In such circumstances, a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general. However, it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement.” (emphasis added) American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) Principles of Medical Ethics, Section 7.

This is the American Psychiatric Association's Goldwater Rule which constrains the public statements of psychiatrists and most other mental health professionals because many other national mental health organizations have embraced it.

We, the authors of various chapters in the book, "The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump," believe it is necessary that the Goldwater Rule be substantially revised and updated to reflect current research and evolving social awareness.

We call on the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and all other mental health associations that have adopted or follow the APA's Goldwater Rule, to significantly revise and amend it in accordance with the following points:

- 1) Formally recognize an affirmative responsibility for mental health professionals to publicly address mental health issues discerned in public figures when there is a clear and present danger to the public's health and well-being.
- 2) Acknowledge our right to identify ourselves as mental health professionals when speaking out, as opposed to being constrained from identifying ourselves as such.

3) Recognize that our duty to use our professional knowledge to educate the public on matters that fall within our areas of expertise like all other specialties, does not violate the confidentiality or privacy rights of patients because such constraints on speech do not apply in the absence of a bona fide doctor-patient relationship.

4) Affirm a duty to address the public in a manner that respects the limits of our knowledge and clearly acknowledges those limits in our public comments.

5) Refrain from speaking out as identified mental health professionals when motivated by personal or partisan preferences; and only speak out identified as mental health professionals when indicated by our recognition of clear and present threats to the public's well-being that arise from public figures in a dangerous position. (Clearly, this precludes commenting as professionals on others who are outside this narrow delineation.)

6) The Goldwater Rule's insistence that it is unethical for a mental health professional to comment on a public figure's psychological functioning without an interview is misguided and without scientific foundation. Forbidding any such commentary conflates a professional's public speech with his/her taking care of a patient. In the former role, we, as citizen professionals, are addressing the welfare of the community; in the latter we provide care for an individual. Further, since the Goldwater Rule was adopted (1973) there has been substantial multidisciplinary research on the questioning the necessity of an in-person interview as the sole basis for assessment in all circumstances.

7) In calling for the adoption of the above points, we explicitly acknowledge the need to avoid stigmatizing individuals dealing with mental health problems through ill-considered use of psychiatric terminology.

These changes are necessary because the Goldwater Rule, in its present form, is antiquated, illogical, without scientific foundation, and intrinsically undermining of mental health professionals' efforts to protect the public's well-being.

Yours cordially,

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