“Truth and Trust in Health Professionals”

Dr. Harvey Fineberg, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation

Being truthful is a virtue, in life as in health care and public health. While it is never ethical intentionally to misrepresent or mislead, how should health professionals convey truthful messages that achieve a desired health outcome? This lecture will consider five circumstances that frequently apply to health decisions and communication: (1) Making choices when evidence is incomplete; (2) New knowledge and understanding prompts a change in practice or policy; (3) Framing messages to promote desired behavior; (4) Shaping messages to suit the audience; and (5) Generalized vs. targeted health action and communication. In the long term, public trust depends on public confidence in both the expertise and candor of health professionals. Making near-term decisions that preserve this long-term goal is a constant challenge. The talk will draw on a range of examples, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Harvey Fineberg is president of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. Dr. Fineberg previously served as president of the U.S. National Academy of Medicine, as provost of Harvard University, and as dean of the Harvard Chan School of Public Health. Dr. Fineberg devoted most of his academic career to the fields of health policy and medical decision-making. Dr. Fineberg’s past research has focused on global health, assessment of medical technology, evaluation and use of vaccines, response to pandemics, and dissemination of medical innovations. Dr. Fineberg serves on the editorial board of the New England Journal of Medicine. Dr. Fineberg is a co-author of the books Clinical Decision Analysis, Innovators in Physician Education, and The Epidemic That Never Was, an analysis of the controversial U.S. immunization program against swine flu in 1976. Dr. Fineberg has co-edited books on such diverse topics as AIDS prevention, vaccine safety, understanding risk in society, and global health and has authored numerous articles published in professional journals.