

# TRUST: A FORT KNOX MEDICAL COMMODITY

William L. Winters Jr., M.D.

*Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center, Houston, Texas*

“Often the confidence of the patient in his physician does more for the cure of his disease than the physician with all his remedies.”<sup>1, 2</sup>

Since removing myself from my cardiology practice of more than 50 years, I have become keenly aware of the meaning of trust. Of all the attributes that a physician might possess, trust consistently superseded every other when patients considered whom they might see in my stead. Can I trust him or her — they want to know — as I have trusted you? Among the several definitions of “trust,” the one I refer to here is “an obligation or responsibility imposed on one in whom confidence or authority is placed; a position of trust.”

Consider another definition: “A commodity is something of value.” Fort Knox, a military base in Kentucky, is considered a highly trustworthy facility and serves as the primary gold depository for the United States government. Gold is something of value and, therefore, a commodity. Like gold, trust certainly has value and might also be considered a commodity in its broadest sense — not a product sold on the market like gold, silver, or oil and subject to the whims of supply and demand, but rather a trait evolving from actions that inspire confidence. Sometimes that confidence develops quickly and sometimes not so quickly.

In today’s culture, the public no longer considers many traditional institutions worthy of its trust. For example, banking, finance, business,

law, politics, and even the science of medicine all have fallen under clouds of scrutiny and skepticism. The good news is that trust begins with the individual, and medicine remains a profession defined by the work and dedication of the individual physician.

In the end, decisions are made between the patient and physician. The patient may have received advice from family, friends, lay sources, and other medical consultants, all likely of variable validity and authenticity. But ultimately, it is still the patient and physician making decisions, preferably together. Decisions made over time with favorable outcomes inspire confidence and, hence, trust. Even faulty decisions followed by an unfavorable outcome may inspire trust if accompanied by honesty, humility, compassion, and personal interest. It is the oeuvre that prevails, the total body of work.

The ethical, moral, financial, and temporal constraints on physicians are real and considerable, but when it comes to the examining room, the only important entities are the patient and physician. That relationship remains primary. It is up to the physician to identify and evaluate the significant issues and to place those in proper perspective for the patient. Performed appropriately and consistently, that duty will elicit the patient’s trust.

May you all be successful, as the future practice of medicine will likely be determined by your success.

## References

1. Avicenna — online Wikipedia Encyclopedia, Ibn Sina (b. 981-1037) was a Persian polymath and the foremost physician and philosopher of his time. Ibn Sina was known by his Latinized name, Avicenna.
2. Henri de Mondeville reasserting the statement by Avicenna in James Joseph Walsh, *Old-Time Makers of Medicine* (1911), p. 270.