

# **Ethical Dilemmas within Non-Physician Consultations: an Examination of Self-referral to Laboratory Scientists**

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## **Abstract**

The hitherto exclusive role of clinicians as gatekeepers to medical services within the healthcare system is under challenge as patients increasingly use allied health professionals as their first port of call. Although these consultations apparently serve patient interests, they raise several ethical issues vis-a-vis whether or not the attending professional possesses the necessary skills as well as the *locus ethicus* in discharging such duties. Against this background, this paper explores the ethical basis of non-physician consultations in Nigeria. Drawing from medical sociology as well as extant bioethics literature, it specifically attempts to understand the underlying principles that validate and sustain patient self-referral to laboratory scientists. Perhaps, because society determines what elements of healthcare fit into her needs, and partly because she is becoming aware that physicians alone do not determine the medical good; the practice has been generally viewed as “normal”. Hence, it has not been given the ethical debate it rightly deserves. We argue that it is imperative to strike a moral balance between what forms the medical good of the patient (in terms of their deliberated choices) and the range of health services that may be competently rendered in the context of these consultations. Indeed, non-physician consultations are not restricted to Nigeria and they may be said to constitute a social change impulse. However, there is need for laboratory scientists to refine their Professional Code of Ethics to ensure inter-professional boundaries are not crossed once they step into these novel shoes.