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ISSUES

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS IN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Shehnaz A. Sheikh

ABSTRACT

Ethics form the base ground of values which differ from one culture to another. Ethics was applied in health care system, since ancient Egyptian times. A physician has moral obligations towards his patient based on physician - patient's relationship. The ethical principle of confidentiality confirms that patient can trust his health care provider not to disclose any information that the patient may have given in order to get cured. A current ethical issue in research involving human participant's informed consent has prime importance. The subject and his guardian must have the capacity to understand the issue in question and the possible risks of treatment in the trial study. We need to do more to ensure that medical research practices are sound and ethical, and the goals of research should be secondary to the well-being of the participants.

KEY WORDS: Ethics, informed consent, confidentiality, research, human subjects, Hippocrates' oath.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics or moral behavior is the ground on which humanity stands for a compatible existence.

To lead an ethical life and to differentiate right from wrong, are universal issues that have to be determined and applied. The word 'ethics' means different to different people and is based on moral, philosophic and religious principles of the society in which it is practiced. It may differ from one culture to another¹. Islam is governed by the Sharia which is based in chronological order of supremacy on the Holy Quran (The Word of God), the 'Sunnah' and 'Hadith' (the practices and sayings of the Holy Prophet), the unanimous opinion of Islamic scholars or *aimma 'ijmaa'* and finally by analogy '*kias*'. If an instruction on a certain issue is provided in the Holy Quran, it is the one to be followed. However, Islam is not a rigid religion on way of life, permitting flexibility, adaptation to the necessities of life and shifts in ethical stands based on the current culture and requirements of the times².

All problems of life have solutions, but all solutions are not based on moral principles. Principles alone do not lead to ethical decisions; decisions without principles are ethically empty².

Moral error still exists in every society. Racism is one

such general example of moral error. Is ethics relevant in health care management? or has ethics an important contribution to make in this field is the usual question asked in biomedical ethics. Ethical norms have to be followed in health care systems, biomedical research, public health, science and technology.

Ethics was applied in medical profession since ancient Egyptian times. The first known documents dealing with ethics are Egyptian papyri dated 16th century B.C. In that era Hammurabi set fees according to the social status of the patient and codes were laid down for physicians and surgeons¹. For health care professionals, legal and moral standards of due care include proper training, skills and diligence. A physician accepts the responsibility to observe these standards. Malpractice occurs if and only if professional standards of care are not met³.

The famous Hippocrates oath is based on ethics. But in the present society, this wonderful oath is becoming limited only to recitation in convocations weight; its literal meaning being lost.

Personal prejudice has no place in a doctor's life. For example, he should treat his patient suffering from alcoholic cirrhosis, or from chronic bronchitis, even though it is the patient's habit for consuming alcohol or smoking. The doctor cannot be ethical by refusing treatment to his patient; on the contrary the doctor should treat him with sympathy. If the physician withholds his service it is considered as shedding blood⁴. In clinical practice, patient's

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best interests are safe guarded by his physician's duty to choose tests and treatments that seem best for the individual's need.

Rooted in the ancient hippocratic responsibility that defines medical professionalism, is the physician- patient relationship of confidentiality. The ethical principle of confidentiality confirms that patient can trust health care professionals not to publicize information that patients are obliged to disclose to them, in order that their symptoms be properly diagnosed, treated and if possible cured⁵. Those who receive confidential information in their professional capacity are bound legally and ethically to protect it against improper disclosure. Thus compliance to confidentiality is ethical. Physicians should never risk breach of patient's confidentiality by their own negligence, or that of their colleagues, subordinates, family members or friends. Physicians may apply legal rulings to excuse a breach of patient's confidentiality when for instance, HIV-positive patients disclose their intentions to imminently engage in unprotected high-risk behavior with partners likely to be unaware of their HIV- status⁵. A physician's perceived lack of trustworthiness may be the primary reason for a patient's decision to switch to another physician³. Thus the question is not simply of personal ethics or micro-ethics that govern the relationship between a physician and a patient. It raises wider ethical concern of the standards of protection of patient's confidentiality that the medical profession requires of its members⁶.

The ethical approach to experimentation in man has several components⁷, informed consent being an important one. Consent in any fully informed sense may not be obtainable, but it is absolutely essential to strive for consent for moral, sociologic and legal reasons⁷. Ordinary patients will not knowingly risk their health or their life for the sake of "science"⁸. The statement that consent has been obtained has little meaning unless the subject or his guardian is capable of understanding what is to be undertaken and all hazards of experiments are made clear. In human experimentation since World War II, hundreds of patients have not known that they were subjects of an experiment, although grave consequences have been suffered as a direct result of such experimentations⁹. The subject at least should know that he is to be a participant in an experiment and secondly, the experiment is to be carried out by an intelligent, informed, conscientious, compassionate, responsible investigator⁸. Consent in the context of research should include¹⁰ **a.** the purpose of the trial, **b.** the capacity to understand the issues in question, **c.** the patient must have actually understood the

issues while giving consent, **d.** benefits to the patient and to society and **e.** possible risks of treatment.

The main moral objective behind informed consent is autonomy on part of patient¹¹. However, it is under-practiced in Pakistan¹². Even informed consent, though important is not protective enough, because of the asymmetry in knowledge and authority between researchers and their subjects. Approval by an institutional review board, though also important, is highly variable in its responsiveness to patient's interests when they conflict with the interests of researchers¹³. Careful attention to ethics should be part of every scientist's approach to research.

Research in any field should benefit others and it should be based on ethical norms. What seems to be breaches of ethical conduct in experimentation, are by no means rare, but are almost one fears, universal⁹. The clinician who is also a researcher may face situations where the demands of research could prompt breach of ethical principles. There is no substitute for honesty in resolving such a dilemma⁹.

Many ethical issues arise during different phases of clinical research, and preparation of a scientific paper. In clinical research, a conflict may arise between the best interest of the patient subject and the scientific requirements of the study protocol. In clinical research, the career interests of the investigator, the financial interests of the sponsoring manufacturer, and the research agenda of the institution may also conflict or compete with the individual patient subject's best interest.

To safeguard patients, investigators, institutions, and the public, various research- related practices and regulations have been developed. These codes help us understand and work more effectively in the ethically interesting domain of clinical investigations conducted in human subjects. Seven essential requirements of ethical research have been defined¹⁴ as value to society, scientific validity, fairness in selection of subjects, favorable risk-benefit ratio, independent scientific and ethics review, informed consent for the research component, and respect and protection of subject's rights to confidentiality.

On monitoring research, the prime importance of an effective monitoring mechanism is to ensure that the conduct of research involving human beings does not jeopardize the rights and interests of research subjects¹⁵.

The best example to quote an unethical research is the Tuskegee study which is the longest non-therapeutic experiment on human beings in medical history.

Genetic research and its associated technology presents issues that are much greater in scope than those raised by gene therapy alone. These are issues that require us to decide what sort of society we want to live in. Should work in molecular genetics be halted? Are the possibilities of genetic engineering too frightening and threatening to deal with? The natural law view of ethics, would not in general, support any policy of ending scientific research. Yet certain types of experiments and engineering possibilities would be ruled out. There is no absolute right to seek knowledge, and restrictions might well be imposed on scientific research if the betterment of society seems to demand it¹⁶.

On human embryo research, diversity of opinion exists even among experts on society's moral obligation to nascent human life¹⁷. According to essentialist perspective belief a person's life begins as soon as the potential for a human being exists, and that an embryo is simply a person who has not yet been born. If embryos were persons, then research on person-embryos would be unethical no matter how useful or important it might be¹⁸.

It was in 1991 in United Kingdom that a health science guideline was issued stating that "Every health district should have a local research ethics committee to advise National Health Services (NHS) bodies on the ethical acceptability of research proposal involving human subjects"¹⁹.

CONCLUSION

Thus in the Third World countries, medical ethics should be a part of the main stream thought process, and we need to do more on ethical issues in research involving human participants to ensure that medical research practices are sound and ethical. The goals of research should be secondary to the well-being of the participants, and that researchers work more closely with communities.

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