

Case Studies In Medical Ethics

Book Reviews

Alan R. Rosenberg, Editor

CASE STUDIES IN MEDICAL ETHICS. By Robert M. Veatch. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. & London, England. Pp. 424. 1977. \$16.50.

The biological revolution has given great powers to medicine. It is now possible to keep a patient's cells alive virtually indefinitely with artificial respirator, artificial cardiac pace maker, artificial tissues, and intravenous feeding of artificial food. Electrodes can now be implanted in the human brain to evoke movements, repress aggressive impulses, and relieve heretofore intractable pain. Human life has been created in a laboratory. Medical ethical problems that once were not more than entertaining speculations about the future are now a reality. Although the exotic ethical issues get the headlines, the less dramatic problems are still the most important: when to withhold the truth from a patient, when to break a confidence, how to break a confidence, why the patient's consent is important, how the dying patient can be treated humanely. Because "a moral mistake can be literally a life-or-death disaster, medical ethics can no longer be regarded as dessert in the smorgasbord of medical education. Physicians must no longer be educated as technical geniuses and moral imbeciles."

This volume is a collection of case studies in medical ethics which originated with the founding of the Institute of Social Ethics and the Life Sciences in Hastings-on-Hudson, where the author is currently a Senior Associate. It begins by recognizing the fact that one can not do any ethics, especially medical ethics, in the abstract. It is real-life, flesh and blood cases which raise the fundamental questions. The chapters and issues within the chapters are arranged so as to lead systematically through the questions of ethics. Although the main purpose of the book is to provide a collection of case studies from which may be built a more comprehensive scheme for personal reflection, the first chapter in the book addresses itself to more theoretical issues. This important and all too short chapter attempts to construct a framework of the basic questions which must be answered in any complete and systematic system of medical ethics. In order to take a complete and systematic ethical position the author states that five questions must be asked:

1. What makes right acts right?
2. To whom is moral duty owed?
3. What kinds of acts are right?
4. How do rules apply to specific situations?
5. What ought to be done in specific cases?

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Case studies in medical ethics serve as vital tools for understanding the complex moral dilemmas that healthcare professionals face in their daily practice. These case studies provide real-life scenarios that challenge practitioners to navigate the often murky waters of ethical decision-making. By examining these scenarios, we can glean insights into the principles of medical ethics, which include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. This article delves into various case studies in medical ethics, exploring their

implications and the lessons they impart to both practitioners and patients.

Understanding Medical Ethics

Medical ethics is a field of study that addresses the moral principles that govern the practice of medicine. The foundation of medical ethics can be traced to the Hippocratic Oath, which emphasizes the importance of patient welfare and the ethical responsibilities of physicians. The four principles of medical ethics are:

- **Autonomy:** Respecting a patient's right to make their own decisions.
- **Beneficence:** Acting in the best interest of the patient.
- **Non-maleficence:** Avoiding harm to patients.
- **Justice:** Ensuring fair treatment and equitable distribution of healthcare resources.

These principles serve as a framework for analyzing the ethical challenges encountered in clinical practice.

Notable Case Studies in Medical Ethics

1. The Case of Informed Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical and legal requirement in healthcare. A well-documented case is that of Dr. Michael Swango, a physician who was found guilty of using his patients for experimental purposes without their consent. His actions raised significant ethical concerns regarding patient autonomy and the responsibility of healthcare providers to fully inform patients about the risks and benefits of treatments.

- The case emphasized the need for clear communication between doctors and patients.
- It highlighted the importance of obtaining informed consent before any medical intervention.
- It prompted discussions about the ethical implications of experimental treatments.

This case illustrates the potential consequences of disregarding informed consent and

reinforces the necessity of adhering to ethical standards in medical practice.

2. The Right to Die: The Case of Terri Schiavo

The Terri Schiavo case became a focal point in discussions about euthanasia and the right to die. In 1990, Schiavo suffered severe brain damage due to cardiac arrest, leaving her in a persistent vegetative state. Her husband, Michael Schiavo, sought to remove her feeding tube, believing it was her wish not to be kept alive in such a condition, while her parents opposed this action.

This case raised several ethical questions:

1. What constitutes a patient's wishes regarding end-of-life care?
2. How do we balance the autonomy of the patient with the desires of family members?
3. What role should medical professionals play in end-of-life decisions?

Ultimately, the courts ruled in favor of Michael Schiavo, leading to significant media coverage and public debate about the ethical implications of euthanasia and the right to die.

3. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study

One of the most notorious examples of unethical medical research is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which lasted from 1932 to 1972. The U.S. Public Health Service conducted this study to observe the natural progression of untreated syphilis in African American men in Alabama, without informing them of their diagnosis or providing necessary treatment.

This case is significant for several reasons:

- It highlights the importance of informed consent and the ethical obligation to prevent harm.
- It underscores the need for justice in medical research, particularly regarding marginalized communities.
- It led to the establishment of stricter ethical guidelines for human subjects in research.

The Tuskegee Study serves as a cautionary tale about the potential for exploitation in medical research and the critical need for ethical oversight.

4. The Case of Henrietta Lacks

Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman whose cancer cells were taken without her knowledge in 1951. These cells, known as HeLa cells, became one of the most important tools in medicine, contributing to numerous medical breakthroughs. However, Lacks and her family were never compensated or acknowledged for their contribution.

This case raises important ethical issues, including:

1. The importance of informed consent in medical research.
2. The rights of individuals regarding their biological materials.
3. The ethical implications of using cells from marginalized populations without consent.

The legacy of Henrietta Lacks has led to discussions about bioethics, patient rights, and the need for equitable treatment in medical research.

Lessons Learned from Case Studies

Through the examination of these case studies in medical ethics, several key lessons emerge that can guide healthcare professionals in their practice:

1. The Importance of Communication

Effective communication between healthcare providers and patients is essential. Ensuring that patients are fully informed about their diagnoses, treatment options, and potential risks is fundamental to respecting their autonomy and fostering trust.

2. The Need for Ethical Oversight

The cases discussed underscore the necessity for robust ethical guidelines and oversight in both clinical practice and research. This includes the need for institutional review boards (IRBs) that evaluate the ethical implications of research studies involving human subjects.

3. Addressing Social Justice

Medical ethics should include considerations of social justice. This involves recognizing

the disparities in healthcare access and treatment experienced by marginalized populations and working to address these inequities.

4. Continuing Education

Healthcare professionals must engage in ongoing education regarding ethical practices. As medical technology and societal norms evolve, so too must our understanding of ethical principles and their application in practice.

Conclusion

In summary, case studies in medical ethics provide invaluable insights into the complexities of healthcare decision-making. By reflecting on real-life scenarios, medical professionals can better navigate the ethical challenges they encounter, ensuring that they uphold the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. These case studies not only highlight the importance of ethical standards in medicine but also serve as a reminder of the need for compassion and respect for all patients. As we continue to advance in the medical field, the lessons learned from these case studies will be crucial in guiding ethical practice and fostering a patient-centered approach to healthcare.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a case study in medical ethics?

A case study in medical ethics is an in-depth examination of a specific situation or dilemma in the healthcare setting that raises ethical questions and challenges, often involving patient care, medical decision-making, and moral principles.

Why are case studies important in medical ethics education?

Case studies are crucial in medical ethics education because they provide real-world scenarios that help students and professionals analyze ethical principles, develop critical thinking skills, and understand the complexities of moral decision-making in healthcare.

How do cultural differences impact case studies in medical ethics?

Cultural differences can significantly impact case studies in medical ethics by influencing values, beliefs, and practices related to health, illness, and treatment, which can lead to diverse interpretations of ethical issues and affect decision-making.

What are some common ethical dilemmas faced in medical case studies?

Common ethical dilemmas in medical case studies include issues of informed consent, patient autonomy, end-of-life care, resource allocation, and conflicts of interest between healthcare providers and patients.

How can case studies in medical ethics inform policy-making?

Case studies in medical ethics can inform policy-making by highlighting real-life ethical challenges, providing insights into the implications of different ethical approaches, and guiding the development of guidelines and regulations that govern medical practice.

What role does interdisciplinary collaboration play in resolving medical ethics case studies?

Interdisciplinary collaboration plays a vital role in resolving medical ethics case studies by bringing together diverse perspectives from healthcare providers, ethicists, legal experts, and patients, which fosters comprehensive understanding and balanced decision-making.

Can case studies in medical ethics evolve with technological advancements?

Yes, case studies in medical ethics can evolve with technological advancements, as new technologies such as telemedicine, artificial intelligence, and genetic testing introduce novel ethical challenges that require careful examination and guidance.

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