

ETHICS

RESEARCH

SCIENCE

POLICY

Professionalism and ethics in a changing world

Professor Vivienne Nathanson



What is ethics?

- Bargain with society
- Influenced by key actors
 - Philosophers
 - Public
 - Politicians/Parliamentarians
 - Press
 - Priests
 - Profession(s)
 - ?more
- Influenced by social norms
- Not set in stone

History

- Prayer of Maimonides
- Hippocratic Oath
- Declaration of Geneva and
- International Code of Medical Ethics

- Four principles
- Rights based
- Utilitarianism
- Kant etc

Four principles revised

Autonomy

Beneficence

Confidentiality

Do No Harm

Equity

(After Bernard Lo)

(Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-Maleficence,
Justice)

Past challenges

- Abortion
- Confidentiality
- Consent
- Discontinuation of treatment
- Brain stem death
- Experimentation/research

Changes to medicine...

- Doctors off their pedestals
- Challenges to concepts of expertise
 - Information from www
 - Health literacy
 - Understanding of rights
- Shared decision making
- Patient or person centered care
- Inter-professional collaboration

Current challenges

- Assisted reproduction
- Resource usage
- Prioritisation
- Communication
- End of life decisions/treatment discontinuation
- Incompetent adult patients
- Role of family in decision making
- Cross border care/reporting

Other challenges

- Multiculturalism
- Movement of persons around the world
- Different social/cultural constraints
- Belief systems
- Law/legal cases

- Changing concepts of complex issues such as
 - Benefits
 - Futility
 - Freedom
 - Rights

Analysing cases

- Autonomy seen as paramount in Europe, Americas, Australasia etc
- Is there a paramount value elsewhere?
- Difficulty in deciding what is a benefit and what is a harm
- Where do different balances lie?
- Balance between individual and collective “rights”

Assessing benefits

- Complex
- Specific
- Patient centred
- Varies with time
- Depends upon morbidity
- Views of doctor/patient/family
- Do lawyers/judges agree with doctors?

- Assessing futility is much the same

Professionalism and ethics

- Nebulous concept
- Overlaps
- Ethics as a marker of professionalism
- Tensions between duties (eg society/patient)
- Embracing societal values

What is Professionalism

- Whistle blowing
- Truth telling
- Duty to society
- Empathy, compassion and caring
- Life long learning
- Commitment – to what? to whom?

Human Rights

- Values based
- Principles
- Some non-derogable rights
 - Right to not be tortured
 - Duty of doctor to care for those in medical need
 - Responsibility of organised medicine to protect both
- Arguments over right to health

Certainty...

There is none

Except (perhaps)

There is always an ethical element to medical decisions. Professionalism requires that we consider them.

Thank You

Vivienne Nathanson

vnathanson@bma.org.uk