

Ethics Day 2005

Current Ethical Problems in Healthcare – Problems and Solutions

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For the second year, the Malaysian Medical Association commemorated Ethics Day on 2nd October 2005. The aim of this celebration was to ensure that the ethics and its practice remained in the forefront of the association's activities.

An essay competition was held for the students of medicine in all local universities, private or public. The title of the essay for the competition was "Current Ethical Dilemmas-Problems and Solutions". Below is the second prize winning article.

Healthcare and medicine is about life, quality of life and death; ethical problems in healthcare have been an issue for a long time. According to the oxford dictionary, Ethics has been described as a set of principle of right conduct. It is also a branch of science that studies the general nature of morals and of the specific moral choice made by a person. Applied to healthcare, ethics allows healthcare professionals to judge the moral goodness or badness of their actions, and serves as a safeguard for patients against any possible abuse from the superiority of doctors in the doctor-patient relationship. As such, medical ethics has a crucial role to play and is an integral part of medical practice since the time of Hippocrates. On the other hand, healthcare is defined as the prevention, treatment, and management of illness and the preservation of mental and physical well-being through the services offered by the medical and allied health professions.

The art and science of medicine have been practiced through the centuries by practitioners. With advances in medical knowledge, science has come to dominate medicine. The very success of medicine has ironically imposed enormous pressures for various scientific, economic, social and political sectors which makes up the current ethical problems in healthcare.

The major ethical problem in healthcare especially in Malaysia is medical negligence. This happens when a practitioner appears seriously to have disregarded or neglected his professional duties to patient. The healthcare provider is expected to conduct himself with professionalism. He should practice within the established and accepted moral, legal and ethical norms. Medical negligence could also be avoided by doctors keeping up themselves abreast of new developments in medicine generally. The upgrading of practical and clinical skills is an essential additional requirement. This could be done by utilising all

available components of continuing medical education, self-study and distance learning.

Issues such as euthanasia and abortion have always been a problem and topics of debate in the field of medicine. Science and technology should not be blamed for this because in my personal opinion, even before the present day techniques were developed, people already had in place procedures that achieve the above said goals. It is a question of ethics of the person resorting to such means. The solutions to this are it requires the careful deliberation and consideration of the doctor. In euthanasia for that matter, when death is deemed to be imminent and curative treatment appears to be futile it is to be ensured that death occurs with dignity and comfort. In any circumstances, if therapy is considered to be life saving, it should never be withheld. On the other hand, abortion could be done if the doctor's opinion in good faith that the continuance of the pregnancy would resolve in greater risk than benefit.

Improper medical conduct by doctors is also another part of ethical problems in Malaysia. They are such as breaching of confidentiality. It is a serious offense because confidentiality is a traditional principle and an integral requirement of the doctor patient relationship. Apart from that, employment of unqualified or unregistered persons to attend, or treat patients, abuse in prescribing drugs, abuse of alcohol, misbehaving, dichotomy and dishonesty are the rest. I feel this is because doctors do not have passion for their profession. This could be attributed to many factors such as poor upbringing of parents, lack of spiritual guidance and incompetent medical schools. Medical schools, which hold an important responsibility to develop and shape a student to become a good doctor clinically and ethically fails to do so because they are more interested in making money. These faculties just take in students from anywhere as long as they can pay the fee without knowing their background. I believe a proper moral and spiritual upbringing combined with a good medical course can help this problem.

In my humble opinion the current ethical problems in healthcare could be solved by educating and exhibiting the norms of good clinical practice. Some of which are, a doctor should be attentive and be a good listener; making the patient feel that he or she is the most important person during consultation, being gentle and concerned while examining the



Mr M. Giritharan
receiving the 2nd Prize

patient, be clear and discreet when discussing possible diagnosis and cultivate a friendly and amicable relationship with working colleagues. However, it is never easy to lay down strict solutions on healthcare problems, and it is not a possible guideline to be accepted by every practicing doctor, because there are as many types of practices as there are many types of doctors and patients.

The great success in modern medicine has made healthcare very ambitious and all encompassing. Economically, medicine has become enormously powerful, as a source of profits and employment. Medicine has become politically very important as healthcare costs have exceeded the means of most individuals, and the government needs to play a major role in providing it. By virtue of the scientific dominance and its economic and political importance, the purpose and ethical concepts of medicine must not be allowed to dilute. The purpose of medicine is to serve mankind, to meet human needs, to continually improve health, healthcare and quality of life for individuals, families and the community. Certain traditions in medicine have evolved which may be considered basic and universal, although some may be adhered to more consistently or fully than others. The emphasis on the welfare of the patients is the primary obligation of the doctor; the consideration of human dignity based on the provision of adequate information, empathy, and kindness as the hallmark of humane medical care are some of these traditions. While different societies may understand these traditions and obligations in different ways with varying emphasis, there is universality in the values that reflect the values of good medical ethics. It is my hope and belief that ethical problems in healthcare could be totally eradicated if every single healthcare professionals and students are passionate about the purpose of medicine. ■