



For you, your career, and your life

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Medical Ethics - A Fresh Look

You've faced them already and you know they're a part of your profession — complex ethical issues that test your knowledge and your emotions. There are rarely easy answers, so it's important to understand the most frequent issues today and how to keep up with emerging ethical dilemmas.

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"Making a wrong decision is understandable. Refusing to search continually for learning is not."

— Philip Crosby, *Reflections on Quality*

Q: What ethics issues are medical residents most likely to encounter during their first few years dealing with patients and their families?

A: The two most frequent issues are likely to be informed consent and end of life decisions.

Everyone knows that informed consent is required before initiation of a treatment, but apart from invasive procedures like surgery, this ethical and legal imperative is often ignored. In part, that's because physicians don't know how to fit a consent transaction into their interactions with patients. Informed consent should be part of patient education and a process of mutual decision making. But medical education has not been terribly effective at conveying that to young physicians.

End of life decisions are always difficult. Although training has improved, working with patients and families to find the right answer for them can be emotionally difficult. Questions about who the decision maker should be if patients can't make their own decisions, what standard should be used, and the role of advance directives further complicate the process.

Q: How can a medical resident stay informed about ethical best

When you find yourself in an ethical dilemma, it can be challenging to know how to respond. During residency, it's valuable to have someone to listen, provide extra support or a fresh perspective. Not just for crisis situations, your Resident Assistance Program is also a resource for coaching and referrals to improve your ability to excel as a physician and a leader.

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practices and build skills in ethical decision making?

A: Ethics should not be something one stops learning about or thinking about once medical school or residency training are complete. Continuing education on evolving ethical issues is as important as staying up with the latest treatments. In addition, hospitals now generally have ethics committees, and many larger ones have full-time ethicists, who can consult on particularly difficult cases. Young physicians should be encouraged to take advantage of these resources.

Q: Do you think doctors reach a certain point in which they can "trust their instincts" about ethical decision making?

A: No. This is one area in which instincts are often misleading. One's gut response to a situation may be very different than one's final approach, after talking with colleagues and consultants and reflecting thoughtfully on the options.

Q: How do good communication skills help doctors deal with particularly difficult ethical situations?

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Money Matters

What Stresses You?

Research suggests that stress is making Americans sick. According to the National Institutes of Health, 80 to 90 percent of all illnesses are either directly or indirectly caused by stress.

For some, money concerns can cause ongoing stress. Yet, if your stressors come mainly from your work environment, you're not alone. Public opinion research finds that a great deal of stress that people feel is directly related to work issues.

In another study conducted by the Center for the New American Dream, researchers found that more than 50 percent of Americans would be willing to take a day off work without pay in an effort to feel less stressed and have more time with their families. Regain a better sense of control with these action steps:

Eat Right. Avoid eating unhealthy snacks. Eating healthy food can increase your energy.

Drink Less Caffeine. Drinking lots of coffee and sodas can increase your stress levels.

Exercise. Exercise is a great way to relieve stress, so try to take a brisk 10-minute walk during the day, either around the hallways or around the building. Walking will give you a mental break from your tasks.

Stretch. Stretching can help to relieve stiff muscles, which can hold tension and make you feel more stressed.

Simplify the Morning. Getting up 15 minutes earlier, and packing lunches or laying out clothes the night before, can help create a routine and get you organized.

Reflect. Take a few minutes to reflect on the good things in life. Taking stock of what you have can improve your mood and outlook.

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Ethics Update, *continued*

A: Many problems that are framed in terms of ethics, actually turn out to be issues in communication. That is, doctors have failed to communicate their view of a situation to patients, or they have done so in a way that patients find difficult to comprehend. Good communication doesn't solve all ethical problems, but it can help avoid them.

Ethics and Character

There are some areas of ethics that challenge young professionals. Often, these are linked to character issues, says character coach and author Susanne M. Alexander.

Everyone has the capacity to develop a wide range of character attributes, says Alexander. Respect and compassion are among the aspects of character she discusses in her book, "Happy at Home, Happy at Work: The Powerful Rewards of Building Character."

"A doctor can demonstrate respect for patients and their families starting with the initial meeting," Alexander explains. "It's important to shake hands and introduce yourself the way you want patients to address you. We're seeing more doctors allowing patients to call them by their first names. That shifts the relationship into a more collaborative one. It's vitally important to sit and listen to the patient and their family. Standing in a doorway with one foot in and one foot out isn't the way to have a discussion. That body language tells the patient, 'I don't have time to listen to you.'"

When delivering a difficult diagnosis or instructing about patient care following a procedure, give clear information and instructions without jargon, preferably in writing, says Alexander. "When a patient is upset or ill, they're not likely to be able to listen or remember effectively. Respect includes making sure that patients actually have what they need to make effective decisions about their health."

"A doctor shows respect by setting parameters about how they can be reached, and by responding within a reasonable length of time to questions and concerns," says Alexander. "Respect is also being available when things get difficult."

Compassion is an especially vital part of character for physicians. Yet it may be necessary to go behind the scenes to learn how it's practiced best. "This is where doctors may want to partner with social workers at the hospital," Alexander says. "Ask them to help you understand the issues going on with a particular patient, and what that patient needs, beyond the physical. Even if you are not the person responding directly to those needs, the social worker can give you a broader understanding."

"When it comes to character, one of the best places to practice excellence is at home," says Alexander. "Residents can practice respect and compassion with the people they live with, as well as those they interact with regularly — their spouse, children, children's teachers, and others in the community. It then becomes much easier to practice character in the medical environment."

Additional Resources

- Journal of Medical Ethics jme.bmj.com
- AMA Journal of Ethics - Virtual Mentor virtualmentor.ama-assn.org ("Establishing the Boundaries of Informed Consent," August 2008)
- End of Life/Palliative Education Resource Center www.eperc.mcw.edu
- "Happy at Home, Happy at Work: The Powerful Rewards of Building Character," Susanne M. Alexander (available at www.amazon.com)