

Medical Ethics: What is it? Why is it important?

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Abstract

The changing context in which health care is provided has created new challenges for health workers, health researchers, and the broader health care of the community. Medical professionals increasingly find themselves confronted with moral questions and ethical dilemmas. The World Medical Association adopted the International Code of Medical Ethics. Other international ethics guidelines address special medical services such as blood transfusions and health care for patients living with HIV/AIDS. Given the importance of ethics in the medical profession, in 1969, the SMC adopted the Medico-Legal and Ethical Guidelines as the first national code concerning medical ethics in the country. It addresses justice, equity and access to medical care, as well as defending the general moral rights associated with medical care. New challenges are facing this document and the SMC as well because long time has passed since it had prepared this important document. New scopes of understanding and application of medical ethics may be needed to promote the medical profession. The objective of this document is to provide an overview of medical ethics in Sudan and to illustrate the importance of adhering to ethical standards in health and medical care.

Introduction:

Developments in science and technology in the twentieth century have led to advances in medicine and health care that have benefited millions of lives. The changing context in which health care is provided has created new challenges for health workers, health researchers, and the broader health care of the community. Medical professionals increasingly find themselves confronted with moral questions and ethical dilemmas.

The need to reflect on the moral dimension of advances in medical and health care, science, and technology, combined with the desire to enhance public health efforts, has led to the establishment of a number of international ethical codes and guidelines. The most famous of these guidelines is the Declaration of Geneva, which was adopted in 1948 by the World Medical Association (WMA). Since its development, it has undergone a series of amendments in 1968, 1983 and 1994. In October 1949, The WMA adopted the International Code of Medical Ethics in London. Other international ethics guidelines address special medical services such as blood transfusions and health care for patients living with HIV/AIDS. Health and medical research were also adopted by some international agencies, including the United Nations.¹ These documents present a set of basic principles for medical ethics that are deemed to be universally valid by interested bodies. The documents are not intended to replace national codes or guidelines; rather, they serve to guide the development of national guidelines. Many countries in the world have established their own national medical ruling body to govern ethical issues that arise within the medical profession. The Sudan Medical Council (SMC) was established in 1964 as the first national independent body to be responsible for medical behaviour and ethical conduct in the country. Given the importance of ethics in the medical profession, in 1969, the SMC adopted the Medico-Legal and Ethical Guidelines as the first national code concerning medical ethics in the country. The main purpose of this document was to ensure the provision of medical care in adherence to the highest possible ethical standards. This document focuses primarily on ethical issues that arise in clinical medicine. It addresses justice, equity and access to medical care, as well as defending the general moral rights associated with medical care. It also focuses on general duties of doctors, dentists and pharmacists.²

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of medical ethics in Sudan and to illustrate the importance of adhering to ethical standards in health and medical care.

Overview of medical ethics

The global medical profession has maintained simple ethical standards for more than 4,000 years. For example, the Hippocratic Oath, the prayer of Moses Maimonides, the Bible, the Holy Koran, and the Islamic legacy, as well as cultures, traditions, and social morality have shaped and guided the development of ethical standards in the medical profession. The majority of these historical documents focus on "avoiding harm to patients".³

Although physicians and other medical and health care providers often face ethical challenges, many of them consider ethics to be a concept pertaining to the avoidance of harm. The aforementioned traditional origins of morality often motivate these health professionals. Although this is the common way of defining ethics, it is not entirely accurate. "Ethics is the moral reasoning of actions."⁴ However, morality refers to social norms that distinguish between right and wrong in human conduct, i.e. the social life of humankind. Ethics refers to a professional moral conduct.⁵ Ethics, particularly professional ethics, describes the moral actions based on professional character and ethical principles in each profession. The branch of ethics that directly relates to medicine and biology is referred to as bioethics, or biomedical ethics. Ethics is an intrinsic part of medical practice and shapes the contemporary medical profession. Health and medical practitioners must confront ethical dilemmas on a consistent basis. In other words, ethical dilemmas are not rare phenomena and thus merit special attention. Institutional approaches to ethics must be implemented, in lieu of individual behavior approaches that are based on someone's beliefs or intuition.

The statements of medical ethics require the physician to do what is best for the patient and place the patient's interests before the interests of the physician. Above all, the purpose of medical ethics is to protect and defend human dignity and patients' rights.⁶ Medical ethics is not about avoiding harm; rather, it is a set of norms, values

and principles. These norms, values and principles are intended to govern medical ethical conduct.

Ethical guidelines

International guidelines such as the Declaration of Geneva (1948) and the World Medical Association's Declaration of Lisbon (1984) proclaim that medical care must not violate any universally applicable ethical standards. These guidelines help medical and health professionals around the world to recognize ethical dilemmas in medical and health care and provide general rules and principles to guide decision-making processes during these dilemmas.

Ethics is culturally defined. Culture and tradition often outline medical ethics in the context where it should be applied.⁷ There are a number of different approaches to implementing moral actions. Applied ethics involves culture and traditions and relies on academia to inform the profession of ethical theories and principles. Professional medical ethics involves expertise from fields such as philosophy, social sciences, medicine, research science, law, and theology. The international guidelines acknowledge that the application of ethical standards needs to account for cultural values and traditions.^{8,9} It is important to mention here that international guidelines are guidelines: they have no power on national conduct, which may be their primary weakness. It is not always advisable to rely on them when medical practitioners are facing critical ethical situations that may specifically relate to local beliefs. In this regard, national guidelines can be beneficial to health care practitioners and ethicists, as these guidelines have the requisite power and authorization.

Bioethics in Sudan is in an early stage of development. For example, the Medico-Legal and Ethical Guidelines, since their establishment by the SMC in 1969, have only been reviewed and amended once, approximately thirty years ago.¹⁰ These guidelines are not in a position to manage exceptionally difficult ethical dilemmas, such as those that relate to new technologies, e.g. the genetic profile test. The SMC would not be able to judge or distinguish between right and wrong if it continued to depend on outdated guidelines. In such situations, many medical professionals, officials, people dealing with biology and

biotechnology, and decision makers may not be able to respond to newly emerging ethical dilemmas. In addition, it is very difficult to find references to bioethics in academic and scientific writings. Bioethics as a specialized discipline does not exist in the health system or the curricula of most medical schools.¹¹

The position of patients is not well known. There are no declarations or other documents to protect patients or to secure their rights and duties. Thus, when patients are ignorant, they are prone to exploitation and maltreatment.

In the turbulent environment of contemporary health and medical care delivery, characterized by the privatization of medical care with new decisions involving genetic medicine, we need more than "archaic" ethical guidelines. With the advent of these new technologies, the code of medical ethics (Medical Ethics and Medico-Moral Problems) has become inadequate or obsolete as new questions and issues continue to confront physicians and other medical professionals.

Why is it important to adhere to ethical standards in health and medical care?

Resnik cited five ways to address this question regarding research ethics.¹² we will follow *Resnik's* statements with a few modifications so as to illustrate the importance of the application of ethical standards in health and medical care. First, ethical standards promote the aim of medical care: to alleviate suffering. For example, recruiting highly qualified medical personnel and exposing them to continuous in-service training will promote their knowledge and skills in both medical care and medical ethics, and may minimize errors. Second, medical care is built on the communication between medical workers on one side and patients and/or patients' families on another side. Ethical standards promote the values that are essential to good communication, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect and fair medical care. Many ethical standards in medical care, including informed consent, protection of privacy and maintenance of confidentiality, provide a grantee for respect for persons. Third, ethical standards will help to build public support for medical care. People are more likely to pay for medical care and donate to health-promoting projects if they trust the quality and integrity of these programmes. Fourth, after

introduction of revolving system in Sudan in 1991, people started to pay for medical care. Some well off persons use to donate money for constructing new health facilities and sponsor health-promoting programmes. This will help to ensure that health and medical care are held accountable to the public. For example, physicians and other medical workers who work in public health facilities receive their salaries from public funding. Those health workers who work in private clinics are paid by patients and should be inclined to perform their duties in respectful manner. Fifth, health and medical care typically involve different medical workers from a variety of disciplines. They need to work in healthy work environments that are characterized by trust, accountability, mutual respect and fairness. Ethical standards may promote the values of cooperation and collaborative work. Finally, ethical standards in medical care promote other important moral and social values such as social responsibility, human rights, patients' welfare, compliance with the law, SMC's regulations, and patients' safety. Adherence to ethical standards can significantly facilitate a pleasant environment for both patients and medical workers.

Medical ethics must be understood as an applied professional concept that is separate from the concept of avoiding doing harm to patients. Part of this understanding is acknowledging that health and medical professionals are confident that medical ethics, as an essential branch of general ethics, offers a valuable framework in which to define the norms for medical care. Thus, medical ethics is concerned with promoting health and medicine and clarifying norms for improving relationships between patients and physicians.

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