

Ethical education as an obligatory course in medical curriculum

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This article was exclusively written for The European Sting by Ms. Nimisha Ramesh is a second year medical student studying in Bharati Vidyapeeth Medical College, Pune, India. She is affiliated to the International Federation of Medical Students Associations (IFMSA), cordial partner of The Sting. The opinions expressed in this piece belong strictly to the writer and do not necessarily reflect IFMSA's view on the topic, nor The European Sting's one.

The past few centuries have witnessed enormous advances in the field of medicine and their conversion into preventive, diagnostic and therapeutic tools which are helping people with debilitating conditions to live a better life. These innovations have the potential to influence health and lifespan of masses, but along with it, also comes the responsibility to ensure that the ethical aspect in clinical practice of medicine remains intact.

Modern healthcare has cultivated multifaceted ethical dilemmas leading to scenarios in medicine that are more complex and complicated than they have been ever before. A lot of doctors, today, are not prepared to manage such situations considering the fact that even though the importance of medical ethics was realised centuries ago, the medical education curriculum in a lot of countries, till date, does not include medical ethics as a subject for medical students.

The solutions to these new ethical dilemmas cannot be found simply by relying on the existing codes of medical ethics, as these principles and guidelines cannot deal with every situation that doctors might face during their practice. The doctor involved, the patients, their relatives, and other doctors may have contrasting opinions on what the ideal solution is in a particular scenario. Thus, ethical dilemmas cannot be solved by simply classifying things into right and wrong, and hence it becomes important to ensure that medical students are trained to deal with such dilemmas in the most rational and ethical way possible.

This formal education should provide knowledge about the ethical aspects of medicine and a practical approach to all kinds of ethical issues possible. The framework of the curriculum should be specifically structured to strengthen the ethical mind-set of the future doctors and should provide simple and culturally neutral approaches to find feasible and practical solutions.

The basic medical ethics such as respecting the patient's autonomy, maintaining confidentiality, not discriminating on the basis of race, religion or any other grounds, providing emergency care to anyone in need, and a comprehensive education about the already existing guidelines and protocols should be included. Students should also be taught how to prioritize one ethical aspect over the other to tackle a situation where there might be a need to do so. The main focus, however, should lie on developing their decision making skills and on sensitising them about the potential implications of their decisions.

Discussions should be held in medical institutes on the new ethical concerns such as assisted reproduction, life-extending technologies, doctor-patient interactions, mental health, genetics, organ transplantations, etc. More patient-oriented researches should be encouraged, in an attempt to understand the probable ethical dilemmas that can arise due to these technologies.

With frequent breakthroughs in the field of medicine today, doctors have to remain updated about these advances for providing effective care to their patients. But at the same time, all these tools and technologies should be properly assessed on ethical grounds, and medical ethics should be included as an integral part of medical education worldwide, to ensure better delivery of health care.

About the author

Nimisha Ramesh is a second year medical student studying in Bharati Vidyapeeth Medical College, Pune, India. She is currently working as the Local Officer on Public Health for the term 2019-2020. She has won various debates, extempores and pageants. She is a public speaker and a singer. In her spare time, she records cover songs for her YouTube channel. She is interested in research and is a public health enthusiast. The picture of a healthy and happy world where every person is able to live a healthy and productive life, irrespective of their socioeconomic background or financial conditions, is what motivates her.