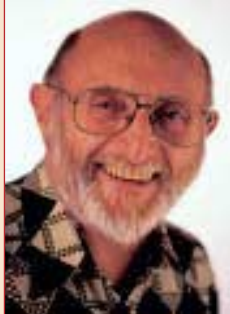


Editor's comment

Medical ethics – it need not be a minefield



Medical practice is a potential ethical 'minefield', according to an article in the *Australian Family Physician*.¹ 'Medical ethics knowledge, attitudes and moral orientation of general practitioners' is the title of a report on a study conducted by a group of researchers at the College of Health Sciences, at the University of Sydney, Australia, and published on their website.² The study explored GPs' perceptions of ethical issues in practice and the role of education in helping them to cope with ethical dilemmas.

In it, they asked the question: 'What is medical ethics?' Among the replies they obtained were:

- 'things like patient privacy, confidentiality,... respecting that person... not violating community moral codes... keeping the law... holding values and standards (of) the profession'.

When asked what ethical issues commonly occur in general practice, the answers included:

- 'once they (patients) get into hospital, whatever a GP who has a 20-year relationship with that person (knows of the patient and their wishes)... it doesn't count...'
- 'level of treatment for advanced dementia patients with infections when family has divided views'.

This shows a rather superficial estimation of what medical ethics is all about, and it also shows a singular lack of perception about the depth to which one has to reach in order to understand the issues surrounding medical ethics.

Further in the report, the authors state: 'Perhaps one of the most telling comments concerned the negative effects of

interruption to the GPs' responsibility for patients' care when they enter hospital.'

Sound familiar?

They also found that most ethics education is haphazard and unplanned - which is the way it has been described by some in South Africa.

It seems that lack of training and understanding in the biomedical ethical zone is a global phenomenon, and we hope that this issue of *CME* will help in assuaging this deficit, not only by its content, but by stimulating readers to continue with their study and understanding of ethical issues in medicine. The Foundation for Professional Development of SAMA runs courses in medical ethics, which we recommend to doctors not only for the CPD points being offered, but more importantly, for the content and the difference the knowledge gained will make to their daily practice.

For more information about the Ethics course and other courses offered by the Foundation, contact the Programme Directors:

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1. Doyle P. The doctor's dilemma: the ethical dilemmas in general practice. *Aust Fam Physician*, 1994; **23**: 1028.
2. Gordon J. Department of Medical Education, University of Sydney.
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