

A Phenomenological Analysis of Basic Issues in Medical Ethics

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Abstract

This paper reviews a major concept in the field of philosophy, namely “Ethics”. The term comes from the Greek word ethos, which means “character”. Ethics seeks to resolve questions dealing with human morality-concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. In philosophy, ethics studies the moral behavior in humans and how one should act. Ethics can be defined as;

“The rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession: medical ethics.”(E.D.Nielsen, 2003)

One of the critical area discusses within the context of ethics is Medical ethics. This comes under the applied ethics. The intention of this paper is to examine the basic issues in the field of medical ethics. It hopes to study the principles and related social, ethical issues in this field.

Introduction

The fields of professional ethics can be categorized into several types, such as Medical ethics, Engineering ethics, Business ethics, Military ethics and Political ethics. The idea of specific medical ethics was first summarised in about the 4th century BC by Hippocrates in the Hippocratic Oath which doctors still take today.

Medical ethics is the study of controversial ethics brought about by advances in biology and medicine. Medical ethics are concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships among life sciences, biotechnology, medicine, politics, law and philosophy. It also includes the study of the more commonplace questions of values that arise in primary care and other branches of medicine.

Medical ethics filled with issues concerning the most basic concerns of human beings and their close relatives. In some sense, the term medical ethics is a bit ridiculous, as almost

anything of ethical concern is biological and certainly anything that is sentient is of ethical concern. Medical ethics then should be understood as a study of morality as it concerns issues dealing with the biological issues and facts concerning ourselves and our close relatives, for examples almost any non-human animal that is sentient. (J.Dittmer, 2013)

Problem of the Research

Medical ethics has received extensive treatment. Ethical issues in the medical field are invariably accompanied by legal issues and the typical causes include societal and professional misconduct. The research problem is examining the basic issues in the field of medical ethics. It involves examining specific controversial issues such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, euthanasia, human cloning, DNA testing and artificial intelligence etc.

It includes such questions as;

- Should medical researchers be free to experiment with genetic material to produce new types of human beings?
- Should brain surgery be permitted to correct psychological disorders?
- What should be the medical profession's attitude to population control?

Methodology

Research methodology was largely based on qualitative approach which analyses the relevant documentary sources from books, journals and web sites relating to this area. A descriptive research design with survey method was applied in this study.

What is Medical Ethics

Medical ethics is a discipline of moral principles that include values and judgements applicable to medical practice. As a scholarly discipline, medical ethics encompasses its practical application in clinical settings as well as work on its history, philosophy and sociology. (Source-<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

The idea of specific medical ethics was first summarised in about the 4th century BC by Hippocrates in the Hippocratic Oath – which doctors still take today. In simple terms, the Hippocratic Oath says that doctors should always work to protect their patients from harm.

Principles of Medical Ethics

The medical profession has long subscribed to a body of ethical statements developed primarily for the benefit of the patient. As a member of this profession, a physician must recognize responsibility to patient first and foremost, as well as to society, to other health professionals and to self.

There are four basic principles of medical ethics. They can be identified as follows.

- **Autonomy**

This means respect for the patient. People have the right to control what happens to their bodies, because they are free and rational. And these decisions must be respected by everyone, even if those decisions aren't in the best interest of the patient. Doctors should never share confidential information with others.

- **Beneficence**

This means acting in the patient's best interests. For example, doctors should never perform an operation where the risk of killing a patient is higher than the change of curing them.

- **Non-maleficence**

“First, do no harm” is the bedrock of medical ethics. This means never doing anything that intentionally harms a patient, such as deliberately giving them an overdose. Examples can be given as follows.

- Do not kill.
- Do not cause pain or suffering.
- Do not incapacitate.
- Do not deprive others of the goods of life.

- **Justice**

This means that all patients should be treated equally, so it is wrong to refuse to treat someone because they are of a certain race, for example justice also means that doctors should think about how what they do affects society as a whole.

Identify the basic Issues in Medical Ethics

Ethical issues in the medical field also emanate from several social as well as professional setbacks. Mainly they can be identified as social issues as well as ethical issues.

Social Issues:

Social issues can be identified as follows.

- Abortion
- Human tissue usage
- Genetic engineering
- Gene therapy
- Stem cell storage
- Euthanasia
- Experiments on dead bodies by interns and students from the medical field

Ethical Issues:

Ethical issues are;

- Human Cloning
- Birth control
- Cosmetic surgery
- Gender selection
- Animal experimentation
- Stem cell research
- Bioethical issues

Ethical principles are fine in theory, but putting them into practice is more difficult. Every situation is different and ethical issues in medicine should be approached on a case by case basis.

Abortion

Abortion was widespread in the ancient world. Hebrew Scriptures defined Abortion:

“When men have a fight and hurt a pregnant woman, so that she suffers a miscarriage, but no further injury, the guilty one shall be fined as much as the woman’s husband demands of him and he shall pay in the presence of the judges.”(J.Hiesberger, 2006)

The Hippocratic Oath:

“I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.”

The Hippocratic Oath says that doctors should always work to protect their patients from harm. But it clearly shows that Autonomy and non-maleficence come into conflict in this issue. How much right does women have over her body and how does that right balance with the rights of the fetus? When we look at it from the moral angle, there are many dimensions associated to abortion. Those against abortion argue that a fetus is very much alive like us and has the capacity to evolve into a complete human being. So killing a fetus is just killing a human being, which is completely wrong. On the other hand abortion also becomes a question of woman’s rights. And what in cases of teenage pregnancy? These are in essence some of the most vital questions that don’t have some fixed answers.

Euthanasia

“How can it be lawful to allow a patient to die slowly, though painlessly, over a period of weeks from lack of food but unlawful to produce his immediate death by a lethal injection, thereby saving his family from yet another ordeal to add to the tragedy that has already struck them?”

(Lord Brown – Wilkinson in Airedale N.H.S.Trust V.Bland (1993) AC 789)

A patient might have an incurable disease and asks their doctor to stop the treatment which is keeping them alive, which causes a conflict between autonomy and non-maleficence. Does an individual who has no hope of recovery have the right to decide how and when to end their life?

- **Why euthanasia should be allowed**

Those in favour of euthanasia argue that a civilised society should allow people to die in dignity and without pain, and should allow others to help them do so if they cannot manage it on their own. They say that our bodies are our own, and we should be allowed to do what we want with them. (Doug Elliott, 2011) So it's wrong to make anyone live longer than they want. In fact making people go on living when they don't want to violates their personal freedom and human rights. It's immoral; they say to force people to continue living in suffering and pain. They add that as suicide is not a crime, euthanasia should not be a crime.

- **Why euthanasia should be forbidden**

Religious opponents of euthanasia believe that life is given by God, and only God should decide when to end it. Other opponents fear that if euthanasia was made legal, the laws regulating it would be abused, and people would be killed who didn't really want to die.

Human Cloning

Cloning is the production of one or more individual plants or animals that are genetically identical to another plant or animal. Cloning can occur at the level of DNA, at the level of the single cell, or at the level of the whole organism. Typically, ethical attention is focused upon cloning in the context of the genetic copying of a whole organism. While the cloning of non-mammals has occurred in research contexts for many years, the cloning of the first mammal, Dolly the sheep, surprised many in the scientific community. What quickly followed was the cloning of other species and intense speculation about the possible cloning of humans. Cloned human embryos have been produced, but there are no reliable reports that any have been implanted in a woman's uterus, let alone developed to birth. (H.Varmus, 2009) At the current stage in cloning research using adult DNA, the random appearance of genetic defects, noted above, appears to be an overwhelming problem. Such dangers would seem to put an indefinite halt on all ethical cloning of humans.



Figure 01: Structure of Human Cloning

Genetic Engineering

There was a pivotal moment in the too place in the early 1950s, which has given rise to the burgeoning field of molecular genetics. In 1952, two now famous Nobel Laureates, Francis Crick and James Watson, discovered the molecular structure of DNA and confirmed that DNA was indeed the genetic material. Now the race is on to decode the genetic information, to discover the genetic basis of all our human traits, and to use genetics to reveal our phylogenetic relationships. What is more exciting and controversial is the possibility of manipulating our genes so as to restore damaged health or even enhance many of our biological functions. However, as is the case with any scientific and technological developments, there are whole host of ethical problems that must be considered. The possibility of manipulating our genes in order to enhance our biological, as well as psychological nature is hugely problematic. (NM Morales, 2001) It is foreseeable that it may lead to a new eugenics, and a radically undesirable change in our human nature. There are also other ethical issues relating to genetic information and the implications of having such information, for example, genetic discrimination and the ethics of genetic screening.

Stem Cells Research

These cells have the capacity to become some or even all of the 206 different cell types found in the human body. It has even been suggested that one day stem cells may be able to form whole organs and hence contribute to organ transplantation therapies. Stem cells come in a wide variety of types such as adult stem cells, embryonic stem cells, embryos and cord blood stem cells. The key ethical issues concern the destruction of human embryos for stem cell derivation. On the grounds that the human embryo is a human life with moral value

justifying its protection, the extraction of embryonic stem cells is unethical. (A.R.Chapman, 1999) The use of dult stem cells and umbilical cord blood stem cells has generally been considered to be free of any particular ethical issues. In fact they have been applauded as ethically superior alternatives to the use of embryonic stem cells.

One limitation to the possible use of embryonic stem cells in therapy is that they will likely be rejected by the recipient. In an attempt to overcome this researchers are attempting to produce cloned human embryos to derive genetically near-identical stem cells for possible treatment.

Conclusion

Ethics deals with right and wrong conduct, with what we ought to do and what we should refrain from doing. Medical ethics concerns how to handle moral problems arising out of the care of patients; often clinical decisions must consider more than just the patient's medical condition.

"Ethical issues arise when not all values can be respected. The values in conflict must then be prioritized and the essence of 'doing ethics' is to justify breaching the values that are not respected." (Margaret Somerville, November 2008)

Ethical principles are normally easy to understand, but putting them into practice is more difficult. Every situation is different and ethical issues in medicine should be approached on a case by case basis. Ethical questions often cause passionate debate, but a doctor must always know and obey the laws of the country they work in, no matter what their personal beliefs are.

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