Teaching medical ethics symposium

Teaching medical ethics to medical students and GP trainees

Kenneth Boyd Edinburgh University

Author’s abstract

This paper relates two experiences of teaching medical ethics, the first to a small group of clinical medical students, the second to a larger group of GP trainees.

‘Write something about how you actually teach medical ethics’, said the editor persuasively. As my deadline approached, I began to regret agreeing. Besides being persuasive, the editor is daunting: both a philosopher and a real doctor, he believes that medical ethics should be taught rigorously, alike in its clinical and in its philosophical aspects. In my initial feeble attempt to resist his invitation, I had asked if Dr X might not be a better writer on the subject. The editor, rather tartly, had replied that he ‘wasn’t much impressed’ with what the physician in question thought of as medical ethics teaching: not really philosophical medical ethics or even critical, just hints and tips to the chaps. But here I was, neither a real doctor nor yet a proper academic philosopher – just a theologian with some student and hospital chaplaincy experience, who from time to time was involved in local ethics sessions for medical and nursing students. And about to be exposed, just like the poor old sophists whom Socrates ran rings round.

Well, so be it. Just on the point of giving up, I was asked to take part in two ethics sessions, one with first-year medical students, the other with general practitioner (GP) trainees, both on the same day. If that was not what the editor had asked about, I doubted what else could be. What follows may not be what he wanted, but let me just write about it as it was.

Wednesday morning, 11.15 am. Eight first-year medical students are doing a project on infertility. It is called ‘a problem-based learning project with clinical correlation’, in other words something designed to give the students an early taste, amid the aridities of science, of what they came into medicine for – contact with patients. The projects, which may be on a great variety of clinical topics, are spread over the first and second terms: the students, in small groups, have some seminars, interview patients and staff, read up on their particular problem, and present a report to the other students in their year at the end. ‘It’s very labour-intensive, you know’, says the nice gynaecologist responsible for the group. ‘Will you do a session with them on ethics?’

What are the ethical issues related to infertility? Fortunately I have been involved in the Institute of Medical Ethics (IME) study called Life before Birth: a Search for Consensus on Abortion and the Treatment of Infertility, just published. After the group and I introduce ourselves to one another, I get them to tell me what they have learned so far – some basic facts about the causes of infertility, the techniques available, counselling procedures, the chances of success. As this seems mostly to be about in vitro fertilisation (IVF), I decide to sketch in the background, the prehistory of the ethics of IVF: what Feversham thought about AID and AIH (‘What’s AIH? a student asks), back in 1960, how it never was officially organised, the questions about consequences for the couples, the children and society, the churches’ misgivings about separating sex and procreation. Somewhere in all this I try to introduce ideas about rationality, personhood and the moral community. And so on to Warnock, surrogacy, embryo research.

Before this gets very far, the students are interrupting. Last year one of them was involved in a study related to the possibility of prenatal diagnosis of Huntington’s chorea. This leads to a discussion of the ethics of positive and negative eugenics. How do we know what is best for individuals, for society? Maybe I get across a point about possible conflict between the doctor’s concern for his particular patient (medical beneficence) and for society (justice). The students seem to see the difficulty. We go on – inevitably – to abortion. The students, as ever, are divided. ‘Fertilisation is the only logical point’. ‘But what about all the lost embryos, twinning?’ ‘It’s very personal, your own belief.’ Questions about the role of authority and of argument are discussed. There is no resolution. We go round and round the question of why fertilisation seems so crucial to some people and why others see life as a continuum. Is an embryo really a person? Is an infant? What are the criteria? I recommend a short reading list, dutifully written...
About half of the ninety-minute session turns out to be on abortion. The GP trainees – or those who are willing to declare themselves – seem as divided on this subject as the first-year students were, although even the firmest anti-abortionist admits being willing to prescribe the coil. I fly my own kite. Just because there is no point between fertilisation and birth (and maybe not those either) which logically marks a change in moral status, it doesn’t follow that any relevant moral judgement is entirely relative, entirely personal. Exercising moral judgement means taking a variety of different kinds of moral argument into account, and while recognising their complexity, trying to be clear on comprehensive and consistent, albeit always fallible. If you prescribe the coil but pull out all the stops for the premature baby, at what point or stage does a second patient have a claim on the doctor? How much weight do you give to the stage of fetal development, the parents’ attitudes, estimates of consequences and so forth? Might it not just be possible, over time, to agree on some more consistent public criteria than at present for making case by case decisions? It would be fairer to women seeking abortion, and might avoid some problems for doctors if such criteria were known. These suggestions have some, but not many takers.

The trainees themselves reject the argument of one that viability is what counts because until then the fetus is dependent on the mother: basically the same argument, they point out, would allow infanticide.

The rest of the session is about breaking confidentiality in the case of a potentially dangerous patient and about how to deal with an adult schizophrenic whose parents have rejected him. I suggest that the latter might be regarded differently if the schizophrenic were rejected by a wife. This provokes some discussion of how moral judgements are coloured by cultural assumptions. But mostly, the argument, frequently getting pretty quickly to the nub of the relevant moral argument and sometimes picking up on the philosophical arguments heard (or perhaps read) earlier. One of the trainees gives a couple of entertaining mini-lectures on the finer points of medical law, some of these apparently unheard of by the others hitherto. One or two of the others sound a bit punitive. I would prefer to have one of the more sympathetic ladies as my doctor. ‘Better than last year’ the trainer encourages me afterwards. ‘But then abortion always gets people going.’

Kenneth Boyd is the Scottish Director of the Institute of Medical Ethics.