Letters

Ethics in preventive medicine: 1

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Ethics in preventive medicine: 2

SIR

I enjoyed reading the recent article by Dr Skrabanek (1) about ethics (or lack of ethics) in preventive medicine. This is an issue of increasing concern to me.

Of particular importance in primary prevention is that, by definition, the participants in programmes are healthy. Unethical decisions will affect people who have been previously entirely or apparently healthy (2). There must be a systematic assessment of risks and benefits for each programme. The risks of adverse effects to individuals have to be balanced against the benefits to the community. It is essential that participants in preventive programmes are fully informed of these risks and benefits.

As well as the ethical dilemmas faced by preventive medicine practitioners, there are also dilemmas faced by participants in programmes. An important one, relevant to vaccination programmes for the prevention of communicable disease, is that non-compliers with vaccines will penalise others. Non-compliers reduce the level of herd immunity and may ultimately contribute to outbreaks of disease. This again emphasises the importance of risk-benefit calculations, and the effective communication of same to participants in programmes. Only then is it possible to make informed decisions.

I congratulate Dr Skrabanek on his article and strongly support his suggestion of a forum to identify the ethical problems posed by preventive medicine and health promotion. There is an urgent need to bring the issues into focus.

References


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