potential consequences that the questions of peer review ethics are superseded and transcended by questions of medical ethics. It seems to me that the basis of medical ethics is to relieve suffering and save lives. How is it possible that a journal devoted to 'Medical Ethics' – both in title and in contents of the published articles – will automatically reject articles of 19,000 words that will save millions of lives, on the basis that the articles are too lengthy? I would think that any scholarly journal dedicated to medical ethics as its main subject matter would actively solicit – on a world-wide basis – all articles that would save millions of lives, whether they were less than a page long or more than 19,000 words long.

For item 3 (accountability, responsibility), I think some ideas of Louis Pascal are pertinent, as found in his article (1). On page 22 he writes: ‘The editors of the world’s learned journals are the gate-keepers of knowledge … where scientific errors have the potential, already partially realised, to bring about worldwide holocaust, then incorrect knowledge presents a threat of enormous magnitude. The editors of the world’s learned journals are at the interface between knowledge and society. Their power is enormous. Their responsibility is enormous’. It seems paradoxical, ironic, and unethical to me that editors of a journal dedicated to medical ethics would attempt to wash their hands of the responsibility and accountability to their readers, to medical researchers, to the medical profession, and to humanity if millions of lives were lost – instead of saved – specifically because the editors rejected an article on the basis that it was 19,000 words long.

I am very interested in knowing how you try to justify such an editorial policy, and I look forward to hearing your courteous reply.

Reference


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Editor’s response

So far as publication of the 19,000-word paper is concerned, I have explained the situation in my editorial of March 1992. I tried hard to persuade Mr Pascal to reduce the length of his paper so that we might publish it. However, our instructions to authors are quite clear, and I was not prepared to publish a 19,000-word paper.

So far as my brief remark, in my letter to Mr Pascal, that there was no way that I could publish a 19,000-word paper even if I thought – and I didn’t – that it would save ‘millions of lives’ is concerned, no, I don’t really cleave to this absolutist moral stance! Suffice it to say here that I would need to be confronted with an extremely compelling case before I so flagrantly overrode the normal publishing rules of the journal, and neither I nor the editorial board felt that this was such a case. We did, however, try to play our part in helping Mr Pascal argue his case before the scientific community, outlining his thesis and drawing attention to where the full version could be obtained.

Alternative medicine: response to Kottow

SIR

In his discussion of the ethics of promoting alternative medicines Michael Kottow (1) confuses the problem of demonstrating their efficacy empirically with that of establishing a rational explanation for any such efficacy. A consistent empiricist following David Hume (2) might be content to accept that an intervention causes the cure of a disease where the intervention is associated with cure, beyond the expectations of chance, in properly designed clinical trials. Kottow is not content with this and requires an explanation for causal action which is coherent with the materialist ontology of disease and the mechanistic view of biological process. The legitimacy of this scientific materialism he argues, ad hominem, is demonstrated by examining the theoretical views of modern organic psychiatrists. The value of concepts like health and well-being are dismissed as elusive to serious analysis, on the ground that they do not clearly identify material objects or scalable physical quantities.

There is little new in these arguments. The 16th century medical establishment persecuted the physician Paracelsus on the grounds that his therapeutics was not based upon the Galenic humoral pathology (3). Similarly the Paris Academy refused to sanction the opening of a free homoeopathic dispensary in Paris in 1835, not because there was no evidence of efficacy, but because homoeopathy’s principles were not congruent with the pathological principles of the day (4). Kottow offers no defence of his materialism on either rational or empirical grounds. Rather he asserts that those who do not accept it should be obliged to demonstrate the plausibility of their alternative ontology. That criteria could be found to assess plausibility is not clear.

Kottow finds another ground on which to judge alternative medicines unethical. Alternative systems, he argues, explain both disease occurrence and therapeutic failure by blaming the spiritual deficiencies of the sick person. This person, thus diminished, becomes dependent on the enlightened alternative practitioner for guidance; a relationship which the latter is clearly well placed to exploit. This position is close to that taken by David Armstrong (5), who has argued, following Ivan Illich, that if medicine is social control, then whole-person medicine must be social control of the whole person. Whether a focus on the individual and his symptoms rather than a pathological lesion empowers or diminishes that person cannot be taken as decided. Jowon (6) has argued convincingly that a symptom-based model of illness has been associated with patient dominance within the doctor-patient relationship, while the modern biomedical model has been associated with the dominance of the doctor.

Kottow’s sociological caricature is not, however, central to his argument, but merely serves to distract our attention from the weakness of his contention that alternative medicines cannot possibly work because they are not founded on modern biological mechanism. It seems reasonable on scientific grounds to require that the efficacy of alternative medicines be demonstrated empirically before we allow their practice to be ethical. To require that their practitioners are materialists, or that their mode of action be immediately explicable within the parameters of our current
understanding of biological process seems beyond reason.

References

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‘Unprincipled QALYs’

SIR
There’s just one point of theoretical interest in Mr Cubbon’s response to my Unprincipled QALYs (1,2). He complains that since his approach is utilitarian and since utilitarian approaches are as old as the hills he ‘cannot believe that the essence of the approach for which I was arguing can be satisfactorily attacked with ephemeral slogans such as ‘ageism’, ‘sexism’ and “Thatcherism’”.

I think Cubbon must have meant to complain that the slogans were ‘contemporary’ rather than ‘ephemeral’; but of course his approach was not attacked with slogans but with arguments to the effect that it could be fairly characterised by those slogans, that they represented its ideology and that the ideology was flawed. In so far as Thatcherism is an ideology, some of the Greeks (ancient) could have been Thatcherite, just as there could have been fascists among them. There were certainly existists among them.

References

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Response to Saunders and Singh

SIR
I was pleased to read the comments about my article Enforced death: enforced life (Journal of Medical Ethics, 1991; 17: 144) by Dame Cicely Saunders and Surinder Singh and I should like to say something about their interesting remarks.

I was, as Saunders correctly surmised, unaware that both the Association for Palliative Medicine and the European Association for Palliative Care ‘...consider that the direct and intentional killing of patients is unacceptable’. However, I would have been surprised to hear otherwise and being aware of this fact does not incline me to change my views in the slightest, since it is people with such views that I am primarily interested in influencing. I would have been interested to know whether these organisations consider that the indirect and intentional killing of patients is acceptable; do they consider that it is OK to kill one’s patients provided that one can say with hand on heart that all one was really aiming at was relieving their pain?

As far as intentional killing goes I can see no moral distinction between direct killing and indirect killing or ‘allowing to die’ as it is sometimes sanitisingly called. To my mind, anyone who considers that even in the kinds of circumstances I described, the direct killing of those who request to be killed is wrong, and yet would condone indirect killing in such circumstances, has to explain why one is acceptable while the other is not. And they have to do so in a way that does not refer to the spurious moral distinction between killing and letting die.

I note with interest that Saunders seems to agree with me both that there are cases where palliative care is unavailable and that there are cases where it is unavailing (ie ineffective) and hence that there will be people who will have life enforced on them, unless they are killed at their request. Naturally, as Saunders rightly points out, in such circumstances patients will have to rely on the compassion and understanding of their doctors and other carers. It’s just that I think understanding and compassion in such circumstances, would lead palliative carers to kill their patients; to fail to do so would, in my opinion, be indicative of a failure of real understanding and a lack of genuine compassion.

Turning now to Dr Singh’s remark, let me first of all deny that it is disingenuous of me to have said that doctors who refuse, in circumstances such as I have described, to kill their patients, ‘guard their own quality of life at the patient’s expense’, since I believe it to be true. A doctor who fails to kill a terminally ill patient who is suffering irremediable pain or distress, who would prefer to be dead and has rationally asked to be killed, cannot claim to be doing so out of compassion for the patient. She cannot refuse help to such a patient and claim in good faith that she has done so because she understands that patient’s distress and suffering. My guess is that it is a naive adherence to the idea that direct killing is always wrong (though indirect killings may not be) that persuades doctors who wish to remain ‘good guys’, to refrain from killing even in in extremis.

It could be claimed that it is because they believe that to enter into the practice of killing certain patients in order to help them could result in their becoming the kinds of people who might kill other patients against their will, that doctors do not want to add killing to their battery of clinical skills. But then to do this is to place the absolute against killing above the absolute against causing suffering (in this case by the omission to kill) and this seems to me to be questionable.

I agree with Singh that it is legitimate that requests for death from patients on account of poor quality of life, should be treated with the utmost caution and fully explored’. I also agree with him that the implementation of acts of euthanasia must ‘be treated with general circumspection and caution’. Indeed, given that I only believe that doctors should kill patients who, in devastatingly awful circumstances, autonomously and rationally request to be killed, I hope that it was obvious in my article that my attitude to euthanasia is probably as cautious as it is possible to be, without being absolutist. I do not, as