

Teaching medical ethics

Teaching medical ethics and law within medical education: a model for the UK core curriculum

Consensus statement by teachers of medical ethics and law in UK medical schools*

The General Medical Council has stated that medical ethics and law should constitute one of the core components of the medical curriculum.¹ The practice of good medicine inevitably raises both ethical and legal issues and demands an understanding of both. In this document, teachers of medical ethics and law in medical schools throughout the UK now offer their own consensus statement about the issues, concepts, arguments, skills and attitudes that all medical students should understand and know how to apply in practice by the time they qualify. This consensus proposes a minimal core undergraduate programme of work which we believe to be consistent with the stated objective of the General Medical Council that students should acquire a knowledge and understanding of "ethical and legal issues relevant to the practice of medicine" and an "ability to understand and analyse ethical problems so as to enable patients, their families, society and the doctor to have proper regard to such problems in reaching decisions".¹ Some organisational principles are also summarised which we believe to be crucial for the successful implementation of our proposed undergraduate programme.

Medical ethics and law in the medical curriculum

Within the traditional medical curriculum, the teaching of ethics and law has often been both eclectic and scarce. If they were lucky, students received a few lectures during the entirety of their clinical studies - sometimes accompanied by small group discussions. The tutor might or might not have had academic qualifications or other relevant experience in either moral philosophy, moral theology or law. Such teaching was and sometimes still is optional, not formally assessed on a par with other clinical studies and not necessarily even for-

mally timetabled. As a result, attendance was and sometimes still is poor and audiences self-selected. The impact of such teaching on the rest of the clinical curriculum could be - unsurprisingly - sub-optimal. At some schools, however, where teaching has been more extensive and systematic, student feedback is good.

The curriculum proposed here demands a balanced, sustained, academically rigorous and clinically relevant presentation of both ethics and law in medicine, and of the relationship and tensions between them. Clinical relevance and the diverse and educational needs of students should be stressed. Teaching should reinforce the overall aims of medical education: the creation of good doctors who will enhance and promote the health and medical welfare of the people they serve in ways which fairly and justly respect their dignity, autonomy and rights. These goals will be achieved through:

- ensuring that students understand the ethical principles and values which underpin the practice of good medicine
- enabling students to think critically about ethical issues in medicine, to reflect upon their own beliefs about ethics, to understand and appreciate alternative and sometimes competing approaches and to be able to argue and counter-argue in order to contribute to informed discussion and debate
- ensuring that students know the main professional obligations of doctors in the United Kingdom as endorsed by the institutions which regulate or influence medical practice - particularly those specified by the General Medical Council
- giving students a knowledge and understanding of the legal process and the legal obligations of medical practitioners sufficient to enable them to practise medicine effectively and with minimal risk

*This consensus statement is also available at the *British Medical Journal* website: www.bmj.com

- enabling students not only to enjoy the intellectual satisfaction of debates within medical ethics and law but also to appreciate that ethical and legal reasoning and critical reflection are natural and integral components in their clinical decision-making and practice
- enabling students to understand that ethical and legal issues arise not only in extra-ordinary situations in medicine but also occur in everyday practice.

Core content

There is widespread agreement about the acceptable ethical and legal contours of good and safe medical practice and little debate about the related understanding, attitudes and skills that this requires. Relevant issues, problems, concepts and arguments are now explored in standard textbooks of medical ethics, in introductions to medical law and in much professional literature. Students must learn sensitively to apply their growing intellectual understanding of the ethical and legal underpinning of good practice in their evolving clinical experience and in their own professional relationships with patients, other health professionals and other members of society.

The following is a core list of topics which should be covered:

I INFORMED CONSENT AND REFUSAL OF TREATMENT

- The significance of autonomy: respect for persons and for bodily integrity
- Competence to consent: conceptual, ethical and legal aspects
- Further conditions for ethically acceptable consent: adequate information and comprehension, non-coercion
- Treatment without consent and proxy consent - when and why morally and legally justifiable
- Assault, battery, negligence and legal standards for disclosure of information
- Problems of communicating information about diagnosis, treatment and risks: the importance of empathy.

II THE CLINICAL RELATIONSHIP - TRUTHFULNESS, TRUST AND GOOD COMMUNICATION

- The ethical limits of paternalism towards patients
- The significance of honesty, courage, prudence and facilitative attitudes: virtues in the practice of good medicine
- Legal and ethical boundaries of clinical discretion to withhold information
- Practical difficulties with truth-telling in medicine: inter/intra professional conflicts and other barriers to good communication

- The ethical and legal importance of good communication skills and the significance of the patient's narrative (as distinct from other professional narratives) in building relationships of trust. The importance of cultural, gender, inter-generational, religious and racial sensitivity.

III CONFIDENTIALITY AND GOOD CLINICAL PRACTICE

- Professional information, privacy and respect for autonomy
- Trust, secrecy and security in the sharing of information: the practical demands of good practice.
- The patient and the family: potential moral and legal tensions
- Disclosure of information: public versus private interests
- Compulsory and discretionary disclosure of confidential information: professional and legal requirements.

IV MEDICAL RESEARCH

- Historical and contemporary examples of abuses of medical research
- Individual rights and moral tension between the duty of care to the individual and the interests of others. Therapeutic and non-therapeutic research
- Professional and legal regulation of medical research.
- The ethical significance of the distinction between research, audit and innovative and standard therapy as well as between patients and healthy volunteers
- Research and vulnerable groups: ethical and legal boundaries of informed and proxy consent
- Research on animals: ethical debates and legal requirements.

V HUMAN REPRODUCTION

- Ethical debates about, and the legal status of, the embryo/fetus
- The maternal-fetal relationship: ethical tensions
- Abortion: professional guidelines, legal requirements and debates about the use of tissue from aborted fetuses
- Sterilisation: ethical and legal issues
- Pre and postnatal screening and testing: ethical issues concerning informed consent and the determination of the interests of the future child
- Assisted conception: legal boundaries and ethical disputes.

In the specification of the “core” it would be wrong excessively to determine its specific content. For example, no specific texts or readings are recommended, but all the topics specified ought to be addressed.

The general organisation of clinical teaching in ethics and law

Success in presenting such a core programme within a general clinical curriculum entails more than getting the content right. There are also organisational prerequisites:

- Ethics and law applied to medicine is now an emerging academic discipline with intrinsic and rigorous standards. While teaching of this subject will and should be widely shared within medical schools, its adequate provision and coordination requires at least one full-time senior academic in ethics and law with relevant professional and academic expertise.
- Ethics and law should be introduced systematically in order to prepare students to meet their own professional and legal responsibilities when working with patients.
- Ethics and law teaching should be features of the whole curriculum, should begin early and be reinforced throughout the course. It should fully be integrated with the rest of the curriculum.
- Ethics and law teaching should also be integrated with the rest of the curriculum through provision of courses and workshops for teachers, including house officers.
- Ethics and law should be formally assessed as are all other core subjects within the curriculum. The details of such assessment will vary between schools but formal assessment should occur and should have the same importance as assessment in any other core subject. Without such assessment, ethics and law applied to medicine cannot be taught successfully within the medical schools. The teaching itself should also be assessed in the same way as is teaching in other core subjects.
- Ethics and law should have sufficient curriculum time and resources explicitly allocated to its teaching to achieve the preceding goals.

As part of its full integration into the curriculum, teaching in ethics and law should feature in the students’ clinical experience, consistently forging links with good medical and surgical practice. Each clinical discipline should address ethical and legal issues of particular relevance to it and its students should be subject to assessment as they would be for any other teaching in that specialty.

Students should be encouraged to present problems which they have personally encountered in their course.

TEACHING METHODS

A variety of teaching methods is consistent with achieving the preceding goals. Ideally, these will entail a mix between large and small groups, exploring issues in a case-based fashion. Coverage of core material in ethics and law, however, should not falter in the face of insufficient teaching resources for small groups. Interactive work with large groups can still be effective and should always be considered rather than opting for little or no cover. The key is to make all teaching of whatever sized groups both clinically relevant and pitched to the academic background and ability of the audience taught.

Conclusion

We have outlined a core curriculum for the teaching of ethics and law applied to medicine and indicated organisational conditions for its successful teaching. We believe not only that it will help to create good doctors, but that it will help them to enjoy a more fulfilling practice of medicine in a world of diverse values and beliefs. We thus commend this consensus statement to the medical schools for adoption as the basis for their teaching of ethics and law and to the General Medical Council. We emphasise that this proposed model sets out conditions deemed to be minimal for achieving the aim of creating doctors who will engage in good ethically and legally informed practice. Many schools may wish to do more than we have outlined and this is to be commended. We believe that they should not do less.

Those responsible for creating the core consensus statement on medical ethics and law teaching

Dr Richard Ashcroft, Lecturer, Ethics in Medicine, University of Bristol

Professor Dennis Baron, part-time tutor in Medical Ethics (Rtd), St Mary’s Hospital Medical School

Professor Solomon Benatar, Visiting Co-Director, Centre for Medical Ethics, University College London and Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine; and Professor of Medicine, University of Cape Town, Republic of South Africa

Dr Susan Bewley, Director of Obstetrics/Honorary Senior Lecturer, United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy’s and St Thomas’s Hospitals, London

Dr Kenneth Boyd, Senior Lecturer in Medical Ethics, University of Edinburgh

The Rev'd Jeremy Caddick, Dean of Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge

Professor Alastair Campbell, Professor of Ethics in Medicine, University of Bristol

Dr A Cattan, Lecturer in Medicine, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Dr Graham Clayden, Reader in Paediatrics, United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals, London University

Dr Albert Day, Senior Medico-Legal Adviser, Medical Protection Society

Dr Maria Dlugolecka, Consultant in Public Health Medicine and Honorary Senior Lecturer, University of Edinburgh

Dr Donna Dickenson, Leverhulme Senior Lecturer in Medical Ethics and Law, Imperial College School of Medicine, London University

Professor Len Doyal, Professor of Medical Ethics, St Bartholomew's and The Royal London School of Medicine and Dentistry, London University

Dr Heather Draper, Lecturer in Bioethics, University of Birmingham

Dr Bobbie Farsides, Lecturer in Medical Ethics, King's College School of Medicine and Dentistry, London University

Dr Martin von Fragstein, Lecturer in General Practice, Queen's Medical School, University of Nottingham

Professor Ken Fulford, Professor of Philosophy and Mental Health, Oxford and Warwick Universities

Professor Raanan Gillon, Professor of Medical Ethics, Imperial College School of Medicine, London University

Dr Danë Goodman, Medical Educational Adviser, United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals, London University

Ms Vivienne Harpwood, Senior Legal Lecturer, Cardiff Law School, University of Wales

Professor John Harris, Sir David Alliance Professor of Bioethics, Institute of Medicine, Law and Bioethics, Manchester University

The Rev'd Peter Haughton, Adviser in Medical Ethics and Law, United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals, London University

Dr Peter Healy, Honorary Tutor, Department of Biomedical Science and Ethics, University of Birmingham Medical School

Professor Roger Higgs, Professor of General Practice and Primary Care, King's College School of Medicine and Dentistry, London University

Dr Anthony Hope, University Lecturer in Practice Skills, University of Oxford Clinical School

Dr Jennifer Jackson, Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds

Dr Ian Jessiman, Elected member of General Medical Council

Professor Alan Johnson, Professor of Surgery, University of Sheffield

The Rev'd Dr Jennifer King, Honorary Lecturer in Ethics, St Bartholomew's and The Royal London School of Medicine and Dentistry, London University

Dr Steven Lutrell, Senior Registrar, University College, London University

Professor Eric Matthews, Professor of Philosophy, University of Aberdeen

Dr Richard Meakin, Senior Lecturer in General Practice, Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, London University

Dr Michael Parker, European Coordinator for Biomedical Research Project, Imperial College School of Medicine, London University

Dr O Portsmouth, Honorary Senior Clinical Lecturer, University of Birmingham

Dr Lisa Schwartz, Lecturer in Philosophy of Medicine, University of Glasgow

Dr Françoise Shenfield, Clinical Lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Honorary Lecturer in Medical Ethics, University College London Medical School, London University

Dr David Snashall, Senior Lecturer in Occupational Medicine, United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals, London University

Ms Ann Somerville, Head of Medical Ethics, British Medical Association

Dr Timothy Steiner, Reader in Neurosciences, Imperial College School of Medicine, London University

The Rev'd Bryan Vernon, Lecturer in Health Care Ethics, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Mr Christopher Ward, Consultant Plastic Surgeon and Honorary Senior Lecturer in Medical Ethics, Imperial College School of Medicine, London University

Dr Luke Zander, Senior Lecturer in Department of General Practice, United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals, London University

Dr Paquita de Zulueta, Lecturer in Medical Ethics, Imperial College, London University

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