The concise argument

Highlights from this issue

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The moral life’ the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch wrote, ‘is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial.’ She wrote that in the 1970s, at a time when both popular discussion and the academic study of bioethics were just getting off the starting blocks; and in the bioethical context such advice often tended to be overlooked in favour of a more exciting focus on acute medical dilemmas and quandary ethics. ‘Today, by contrast, the signiﬁcant moral choices, through free, are not the result of the medical information they received from their doctors’, but of some intervening, unrelated or even accidental experience which made them change their initial decision not to consent? Relating this to a classic problem (raised by Edmund Gettier) in epistemology, the author suggests that the standard justiﬁcation of informed consent with reference to the principle of respect for patient autonomy (which in practice necessarily involves some consideration of the relevant information) may need to be rethought. Autonomous also appears, but in the less familiar context of the public understanding of science, in Pickersgill’s paper on ‘Research, engagement and public bioethics’ (see page 698). Against the background of a signiﬁcant shift in emphasis, by British scientiﬁc and medical research funding bodies, from ‘science communication’ and ‘public understanding of science’ towards ‘public engagement with science’, and based on the author’s own research on the social and ethical dimensions of neuroscience, the paper argues for ‘a fresh emphasis on public understandings of research’. ‘To address these issues’, the author argues, ‘the onus is on...science educators to ensure that the messy realities of scientiﬁc life are embedded within communication of biomedical knowledge’, not least in order to ensure that ‘individuals and social groups...unfamiliar with some of the speciﬁcs of certain modes of research and ethical frameworks’ do not ‘have their autonomy compromised when they come to participate in studies’.

REFERENCE