

Medical Ethics



Why are Ethics important?

Medical professionals are continuously in the news due to ethical decisions that they have made.

Guidelines exist to help them in situations like this.



The 4 Principles of Ethics

Autonomy

Beneficence

Non-maleficence

Justice

Can you think of any recent examples in the news?

The 4 Principles of Ethics Explained

These four principles often can contradict each other in tricky situations, which is why medical professionals have to learn to navigate ethical situations using the guidelines they are provided with in their training.

Ethical Questions regularly come up in interviews. Learn the 4 principles of ethics and use them to back up your answer.

But remember—there aren't usually right and wrong answers, mostly grey areas and it's more important that you have the skills to look at facts and come to a judgement after weighing up the evidence.

Autonomy

A concept found in moral, political and bioethical philosophy. Within these contexts, it is the capacity of an individual to make an informed rational decision.

Beneficence

The state or quality of being kind, charitable or beneficial

Non-maleficence

"To do no harm"

Many beneficial therapies also have serious risks—do the benefits outweigh the burdens?

Justice

Physicians should treat similarly situated patients similarly and allocate resources justly.

In face of limited resources, physicians should practice cost effective medicine.



Ethical Scenarios

Medical Interviews often assess your ability to deal with various ethical scenarios, focusing on key areas highlighted below. Have a go at assessing the scenarios below!

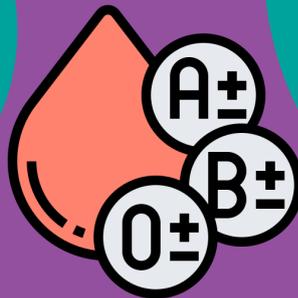
Remember to consider the 4 Principles of Ethics!



Case 1: Medicine

Harry, (15) has been diagnosed with leukaemia and needs a life saving blood transfusion. His parents refuse to give consent for this as it is against their religion. Harry says he is scared of dying and would like the blood transfusion. As his oncologist, what would you do?

Up to age 16, medical consent is down to the parents- unless the child is deemed to be mature enough to fully understand what is involved.



As the doctor, you have to outline risks if he doesn't have blood transfusions.

If you and parents/child don't agree, you can't go ahead with what you think is best. Parents may want to ask second medical opinion or it can be escalated to court level if you as doctor think the treatment is ultimately going to save a life.

Case 2: Medicine

A 37 year old man has been diagnosed with HIV and discloses to your (their doctor) that they have not told their partner. What do you do?

The patient has the right to decide what to do with regards to their disease and their diagnosis.

Under normal circumstances the decision about informing people of a diagnosis is up to the patient, only under certain circumstance can a medical professional intervene.

It is not against the law for someone to have sex without informing someone of their HIV diagnosis, but if transmission does occur then that could be a criminal offence.

Under GMC guidelines you can disclose information to a person in close contact with a patient with a serious communicable disease like HIV if they are at risk of infection/serious harm, and the patient cannot be persuaded to tell them themselves.



Case 3: Dentistry

A 40 year old man comes into your clinic. By looking at his dental records, you see that he has not visited the Dentist in over a decade. His teeth are severely rotten and he has a bad abscess on one of his molars. He tells you that he can no longer eat solid food due to the pain, but refuses treatment due to a phobia of needles. If he leaves his teeth, it could become critical to his health.



Phobia of needles- may want to tell him how crucial it is to his health. Could find alternative method that doesn't require needles

Education and prevention- make sure he knows how serious it is and give information on how to prevent this happening again in future

Solid food- may want to suggest some other ways of eating e.g. soups, liquid forms

Case 4: Dentistry

A 14 year old boy came for a check up with his father. The father does not want the son to have any teeth removed. The son is in pain and is trying to tell you that he would like to have the tooth removed. The son and father cannot speak much English.

Parent vs. child needs to take into account child maturity to understand consequences

A translator is very important from the outset—would need to make sure they understand what you are saying and vice versa

Does he need to have the teeth removed? No indication he does- children may just want to remove the pain, may not know what the best way is to deal with it is. Are there other methods of fixing than removal?

Education may be required on preventing further tooth pain

Case 5: Biomedical Sciences

Many people are against animal testing, however most would agree that human life is more important than animals.

You have identified a drug that may block the progression of lung cancer. To research the drug you need to induce this type of cancer in mice and observe the effects. What would you do?



Should animals be killed if lung cancer is linked to smoking (which is a choice)? However this is a link, not necessarily causal

Case 6: Biomedical Sciences

You diagnose a patient's down syndrome as genetic- the patient's mother does not want to disclose to her sister that there is a genetic mutation in the family as she has suffered multiple miscarriages. How would you deal with this?

The Patient confidentiality of test results must be considered; this cannot be disclosed to others.

Hope that the sister would see a link and come to you/ genetics counsellor herself
Talk to the mother about telling her sister and explain why she may want to do this.—potentially to help prevent any further suffering.



Case 7: Pharmacy

A patient has been enrolled on a stop smoking scheme and has been given replacement therapies. Before your follow up review, the you see the patient smoking outside. The patient then asks you for higher doses of nicotine replacement- what would you do?

Strongly advise that smoking will not help with the nicotine replacement therapies- outline the risks and educate. Try suggest ways to break habit of smoking itself e.g. other activities to do, support groups,



Case 8: Psychology

A man has suffered a brain injury from a car crash, which prevents him from using the part of the brain that controls emotion and aggression. He kills an elderly person because they got in his way. Is he responsible for the crime?

Testing may be required to make sure of the damage



Brain damage to emotion centres means you are likely to not understand consequences of actions/ right and wrong

The famous case of Phineas Gage, who suffered a brain injury in 1848. This was the first case to suggest the brain's role in determining personality, and that damage to specific parts of the brain might induce specific mental changes.



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