

Ethics and Change

I've heard experienced doctors say that ethical problems are the most difficult ones to face. It is more comfortable to tackle a thorny diagnostic or management issue.

There was a time in Western medical circles when almost nothing was written about medical ethics. Prior to the Second World War, people's presuppositions were largely the same or assumed to be so.

Since then much has happened, technologically and otherwise, to reduce the common ground between us. When patients and doctors, and colleagues amongst themselves no longer take the same things for granted, ethical problems surface. An avalanche of rapid change has covered us. The bomb, the contraceptive pill, the rise of secular ethics, organ transplantation, aggressive surgery and other cancer treatments, intensive care technology, improved anaesthesia, the multi-national drug industry, the increasing cost of health care, molecular biology, the free market vs socialism debate, AIDS and much more have radically and permanently changed our context. Knowing what to do is no longer obvious. Symposia and publications on medical ethics are commonplace today. Medical schools are trying new ways of teaching ethics. There is terminology to be learnt. Concepts, however, are of little value if not understood at the bedside, in the consultation, the operating theatre, the rooms from which we administer our practices and spend the national health rand.

As general practitioners we increasingly face the issues especially raised by AIDS and dwindling resources. Confidentiality, the management of scarce resources, the

interest of the individual vs the family, the unborn child and the community need to be dealt with.

Our basic ethical position we pick up at home, probably in our preschool years. Medical ethics is grafted onto this as we enculturate into the family and culture of medicine. I say 'pick up' as we mostly learn from role models at a subconscious level. We do what others do and not so much what they say.

Teaching and learning ethics is not easy. If you teach, students are quick to remind you of your inconsistencies. That is, your lack of integrity! In teaching ethics today we need to lay our mistakes and inconsistencies on the table. In so doing, students may face their own and come to learn ethics increasingly at a conscious level. Social change is so rapid that we cannot wait for the slow process of picking up our ethics from the hidden curriculum.

Sam Johnson