

Ethical Principles in General Practice: Complexities with Compassion and Integrity

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DESCRIPTION

General practice serves as the foundation for healthcare delivery, providing comprehensive, patient-centered care to individuals across the lifespan. Within this dynamic and diverse field, medical ethics play a fundamental role in guiding the actions and decisions of healthcare professionals. This note explores the ethical considerations and challenges faced by General Practitioners (GPs) in everyday practice, highlighting key principles, dilemmas, and strategies for upholding ethical standards while promoting the well-being of patients.

Ethical challenges in general practice

Some of the ethical challenges in general practice are

Informed consent: Obtaining valid informed consent can be challenging in general practice, particularly in situations where patients may have limited health literacy, cognitive impairment, or language barriers. GPs must ensure that patients understand the nature of their condition, the proposed treatment options, and the potential risks and benefits, facilitating meaningful discussions and shared decision-making.

Confidentiality: Protecting patient confidentiality is most important in general practice, but it can be complicated by the need to share information with other healthcare providers, caregivers, or public health authorities for the sake of patient care or public safety. GPs must balance the duty to maintain confidentiality with the duty to disclose information when necessary, following ethical guidelines and legal requirements. GPs have a duty to do no harm, prioritizing patient safety and avoiding actions or omissions that may cause unnecessary harm or suffering.

End-of-life care: Discussions about end-of-life care and advance care planning can be emotionally challenging for GPs and patients, requiring sensitivity, empathy, and effective communication. GPs must respect patients' wishes regarding resuscitation, life-sustaining treatments, and palliative care,

providing support and guidance to patients and their families during difficult decisions.

Resource allocation: Limited healthcare resources and competing demands pose ethical dilemmas for GPs, who must navigate tensions between providing optimal care for individual patients and stewarding resources for the broader community. GPs must make ethically informed decisions about resource allocation, considering factors such as clinical need, cost-effectiveness, and distributive justice.

Strategies for upholding ethical standards

Building trusting relationships with patients is essential for effective general practice and ethical decision-making. GPs should prioritize open, honest, and transparent communication, listening attentively to patients' concerns, respecting their perspectives, and addressing any misunderstandings or misconceptions.

Continuing education and reflection: Ethical practice requires ongoing learning, self-reflection, and professional development. GPs should stay abreast of ethical guidelines, legal regulations, and best practices through continuing education opportunities, case discussions, and participation in ethical committees or consultations.

Collaborative care and consultation: Complex ethical dilemmas may benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration and consultation with colleagues, ethics committees, or specialist advisors. GPs should seek input from other healthcare professionals, engage in shared decision-making processes, and respect diverse perspectives and expertise.

Advocacy for patients' rights: GPs have a responsibility to advocate for the rights and well-being of their patients, including access to high-quality healthcare, equitable treatment, and protection from harm. GPs can advocate for policy changes, raise awareness about social determinants of health, and empower patients to advocate for themselves.

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CONCLUSION

General practice is imbued with ethical considerations and responsibilities that shape the provision of care and relationships between patients, practitioners, and the broader healthcare system. By upholding principles of respect for

autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, GPs can navigate ethical challenges with integrity, compassion, and professionalism. Through reflective practice, effective communication, and collaborative decision-making, GPs can promote ethical excellence in general practice and uphold the trust and confidence of the communities they serve.