

Editorial

Evidence based medical ethics: A critical evaluation

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Abstract

Education in the medical colleges in some parts of the world and treatment of the patients in most parts of the world is leaning towards evidence based practices and medical ethics are no exception to this trend. The ethical values of the society are changing since the days of Hippocrates when the moral values were controlling the profession and earning of money by medical professionals. Following these values sometimes lead to lot of dilemmas in the medical profession. Due to increasing investments in the medical establishments and emergence of corporate hospitals aims and visions of healthcare providers are changing and ethical dilemmas are cropping up while treating the patients. Evidence based ethics are definitely a patient centered approach where individual cases can be treated depending upon the available evidence and it will be easy to solve the ethical dilemmas in a way where the interest of patients as well as health care providers are not laid up. It is better to know the good points of any emerging field but simultaneously it is our duty to know the limitations of the same.

Keywords: Medical ethics, ethical dilemmas, evidence based medical practice, litigations, case-based ethics, research based ethics

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Introduction

"Ethics are the conscious reflection on our moral beliefs and attitudes. Ethical Principles justifies or defends moral rules and/or moral judgments¹". Ethics have developed gradually by the thoughts of philosophers, theologians and rulings of law and regulations². Actually ethics are how people should act or ought to act³. There are usually three different ways of interpreting ethics i.e. descriptive, normative and analytical. Descriptive means how people are, normative means how people should be and analytic which is also called meta-ethics⁴ "is the philosophical study of nature of questions about ethical judgements⁵." Ethical rounds in the hospitals are helpful to see the various angles of the ethical issues, to get the insight into various ethical issues and are helpful to understand the various aspects of ethics⁶.

"Evidence-based medicine" (EBM) is the use of therapy that had been proved and tested in a rigorous manner to the point of its becoming "state of the art"⁷. "Evidence based medicine is the conscientious explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the medical care of the individual⁸". Evidence based medicine highly appreciates evidence based treatment so a trend started in the present scenario to provide solution to ethical dilemmas on the basis of cases reported in the literature² and we can say that evidence based ethics are similar to ethics based medicine⁹. Jansen is of the opinion that if evidence based medicine is being used then benefit of evidence based ethics must not be denied to persons using these methods so that they can know what harm or benefits they are going to face to adopt a new technology and government agencies should also try to gather evidence based ethics simultaneously before formulating the policies and laws¹⁰.

Evidence based system first developed in the practice of medicine and then it spread to the other fields of education including ethics. It is better to understand evidence based medicine in order to understand the evidence based ethics completely¹¹. Ethical dilemmas are solved by clinicians in different ways. It varied from being normative to being empirical or objective. Being objective may be trying to solve the things as the research and cases are reported in the literature and this trend continued to get unstinted support by Tyson¹² and Roberts¹³. It is better to rely on evidence based ethics when there are serious and prolonged consequences for the patient and their families and there is less of clarity or uncertainty of decision taking due to involvement of ethical issues and which also will be better acceptable to all concerned¹⁴.

Ethics are sometimes interpreted differently by different users and experts. This leads to criticism of the method of interpretations of ethics. Confidence in normal ways of interpretation of ethics is decreasing and evidence based ethics is threatening the normative ways of interpretation of ethics¹¹. Sometimes cost of critical care jeopardizes the ethical issues¹¹ particularly in countries where there is always shortage of resources. Evidence based ethics appears to legitimize the ethical decisions¹⁵. Inquiries based upon evidence based ethics provide practical solutions to many ethical problems which are faced in the present scenario¹³. Synder & Guthier (2008) have beautifully helped to solve the ethical dilemmas by evidence based legal precedents and application of ethical theories taking into consideration the gender, age and cultural backgrounds of the patients by presenting typical patient scenarios¹⁶.

Discussion

Caution must be used to label anything as evidence in ethics and it must be statistically proven evidence and must be used in a scenario for which it has been proved to be useful¹⁷. Sugarman (2004) is staunch supporter of evidence based ethics but prefers the strongest evidence in the form of randomized control trials¹⁸. Goldenberg (2005) is strongly opposed to the movement of evidence based ethics as he opines that evidence based ethics are incompatible with bioethics normative mandate and should not be used and should be further researched¹¹. Evidence based ethics gives an indication of attitudes and practice at a particular time but cannot be simply consequent of empirical observation of practice but ethical principles will help us to do research to be useful for application of these principles to solve the ethical dilemmas².

There is a big question what will be considered good evidence in this evidence based ethics¹⁷. Strech (2008) is of the opinion that use of evidence based ethics should be discouraged till we a consensus can be reached to differentiate between the quality of information available by empirical ethics¹⁵. There are challenges for training in basic skills for locating, communicating and critically appraising and determining the quality standards and adequate reporting of empirical evidence research in journals¹⁹. There is always a need for training of the staff for using evidence based ethics before we start using it and it has been documented that such training is useful which was demonstrated in a controlled trial of pediatric house staff²⁰. We should not forget the limitations of answering ethical dilemmas solely on the principles of evidence based ethics². There should be a rigorous defining of evidence and rigorous implementation of the established criteria to get this evidence¹⁷.

There are ethical challenges in any research and the best thing to face these challenges can be to rely on evidence based ethics particularly in the areas of risk benefit analysis and surrogate consent and decision making capacity in neuro-therapeutics research²¹. Data of evidence based ethics may help in certain situations to resolve certain moral issues in a better way e.g. participation of mentally ill persons in a research. In such situations it provides practical solutions¹³. The ultimate aim of the evidence based medicine should be for the benefit of the patient and not the financial interest of the treating doctor or institution¹⁷.

Conclusion

It appears that with evidence based ethics approach subjective biases in interpretation of ethics are bound to become obscure in the times to come. Evidence based practices are gaining ground fast and it will be better to adapt to the emerging field of evidence based medical ethics but simultaneously we should not lose the basic focus of the ethics in using evidence based ethics. There may be situations when there is no satisfactory evidence in the literature and there are limitations of applications of evidence based ethics. In my opinion it may be better to use evidence based ethics and normative interpretation of the ethics judicially so that both methods supplement each other rather than confronting each other till we can adopt the approach of evidence based ethics without any criticism or in those situations where normative interpretation is posing a lot of dilemmas. Further evidence based ethics must be regularly evaluated to see that these are not causing more harm than benefits to the patients.

Conflict of Interest

None

Dr. R K Gorea

MD, DNB, MBA, PhD

Editor in Chief

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