



Manfred Maier, MD
manfred.maier@meduniwien.ac.at

3 – Ethical Dilemmas in Family Medicine - a Workshop

Manfred Maier, MD
Professor, Chairman, Dept.
General Practice, Vienna,
Austria; Convener of the WONCA
Working Party on Ethical Issues

Background

At the WONCA Europe Conference 2000 in Vienna, Austria, the programme included a special symposium entitled “challenges to our professional attitudes- past and present”. This full day symposium covered areas and time periods from the past to the present where the medical profession in general or individual colleagues have been or were involved in developments based on unique political situations: the Holocaust in Europe, the Apartheid in South Africa, torture of prisoners in areas of war or the death penalty in the United States. Experts and eyewitnesses of these developments gave stunning insight into the circumstances whereby physicians could get involved and sometimes were even eager to do so.

This symposium attracted a full auditorium and resulted in the founding of a Special Interest Group (SIG) on ethical issues in Family Medicine by WONCA. In 2002 the group gathered to formulate the terms of reference: “to attempt to illustrate the nature of ethical issues encountered by WONCA and its members and to explore the principles, values and beliefs which inform decisions”. Thus, the aims of SIG were formulated:

1. To identify common principles of ethical dilemmas
2. To consider circumstances which favour the development of ethical dilemmas
3. To raise awareness about ways to solve some of these ethical dilemmas
4. To develop an instrument useful to assess professional attitudes

Since that time, the proceedings of the special symposium from WONCA Europe Vienna 2000 have been published (1); a list of interested colleagues has been established and the group has tried to identify Family Doctor's working groups on ethical issues around the globe. In addition, the group has reviewed the teaching situation for professional attitudes worldwide, has introduced a forum for discussion on ethical issues and tries to motivate colleagues to initiate similar activities in their associations or back in their home country. These activities are promoted at almost every WONCA Europe conference and all WONCA World conferences by organizing a workshop on “ethical dilemmas in FM” and a special symposium on “challenges to our professional attitudes” addressing selected topics such as inequalities in health, conflicts of interests, end of life care, electronic health records, etc.

So far, the activities of the group, which became a Working Party (2) at the WONCA World conference 2010, have attracted a very interested crowd - at times it has been difficult to accommodate all participants in the room provided!

The Workshop

In the workshop, practical situations involving regularly occurring ethical dilemmas in Family Medicine are presented and their background and possible consequences for the patient, his/her family and the physician are discussed. Typically, the group work starts with short presentations by the workshop participants, demonstrating situations involving ethical dilemmas.

The participants then select 3-4 situations out of those presented, split into small groups and discuss the following issues:

1. The patient's history and other factors, which resulted in the development of the particular ethical problem presented
2. The possible consequences of the situation for the patient and the physician
3. Possible solutions
4. What are the basic ethical principles demonstrated and challenged by this situation?

The aim of this workshop is to increase awareness in ethical standards, attitudes and global differences in the legal context of clinical practice applicable to future medical graduates and Family Doctors. Here are a few examples of the difficult situations presented:

- Both a woman and her husband are patients with the same family doctor. The woman receives Diazepam for anxiety and depression due to metastatic breast cancer; her husband is in early retirement and in a consultation with his Family Doctor complains about his sleepiness. Previously, the woman told the Family Doctor that in the evening she puts some of her pills into her husband's wine so that he would not sexually approach her.
- A patient with a haemoglobin level of 2.4 refuses both diagnostic procedures and therapy suggested by his Family Doctor.
- A sixteen year old boy suffers from heavy injuries and tetraplegia after a car accident; it turns out that he had too much alcohol in his blood. His father requests the Family Doctor to delete this information from the medical record for reasons of disability insurance coverage.
- A 54 year old woman with diabetes and diabetic nephropathy needs kidney transplantation. According to the legal situation she is not entitled for a kidney transplant in her country. However, for a large fee, she is offered the kidney of a prisoner in China who is facing the death penalty. She approaches her Family Doctor for advice.
- An elderly lady first refuses diagnostic clarification and therapy of her hip fracture; a few days later she agrees with the suggestion by her Family Doctor to be treated in the hospital and dies there following surgery. The Family Doctor feels guilty.
- In a given country, influenza vaccination at the Family Doctor-level is obligatory for every citizen and those who refuse are punished with a 400 Euro fine; moreover, Family Doctors are legally obliged to report every patient who refuses to comply.

Among the questions quite often discussed and exchanged among participants are those related to the respective health care system, the respective legal framework, the needs and demands of patients in the country concerned, the expectations of patients and society, conflicts of interest, options for support and advice in these situations, the need for efficient communication, how to react in the particular situation, etc. Finally, the principles and responsibilities of medical professionalism (3) such as the principle of respect of patients' autonomy, priority of patients' welfare and of promoting social justice and equity are identified and their value and possible discrepancies in political or market reality are discussed. Despite these principles and guidelines however, the family doctor is more often than not alone in his/her decision regarding an individual situation.

The WP on ethical issues in FM plans to raise awareness of the importance of professional attitudes at every level of medical education and training and supports the idea to establish Family Medicine as the leading discipline in teaching medical ethics/professional attitudes to students and colleagues.

This will be accomplished through promoting widespread dialogue within the profession, initiating and supporting research and disseminating information throughout the WONCA community, the international academic community, healthcare organisations and government agencies.

Take Home Messages

The WP workshops on Ethics described aims to:

- identify common principles of ethical dilemmas as they occur in daily practice
- discuss circumstances which favour their development
- to raise awareness about ways to solve and prevent some of these ethical dilemmas

Original Abstract

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/192-ethical-dilemmas-general-practice-workshop>

References

- Kochen M, Rebhandl E, Maier M; Challenges to our Professional Attitudes- past and present. *Verlag der Österreichischen Ärztekammer*, 2001, ISBN 3-901488-22-7
- <http://www.globalfamilydoctor.com/groups/WorkingParties/EthicalIssues.aspx>
- Medical professionalism in the new millennium: a physicians' charter. Medical Professionalism Project; *The Lancet* 2002, 359, Issue 9305: 520-522 (DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(02)07684-5)

