



Empowering Patients: What You Should Know About Medical Ethics

Medical Ethics or Bioethics is the application of ethical principles to healthcare.

- Dilemmas arise when these principles conflict.
- A treatment is considered appropriate, if the potential benefits outweigh the potential burdens or harm.
- Life support (e.g. CPR, artificial feeding and ventilation) is appropriate, if it provides an acceptable quality of life (as judged from the patient's perspective).

Why Ethics Matters?

Medical ethics is the foundation of medicine and applies every time you interact with a healthcare provider.

Our tests and treatments are merely tools. Ethics guides us in their appropriate use.

The Principles of Bioethics

1. **Non-maleficence:** The first rule of medicine: "Above all else, do no harm."
2. **Beneficence:** Do good. The primary goal of medicine is to help the individual patient.
3. **Autonomy:** The right of the capable individual to direct his or her own healthcare. Informed consent is an essential aspect of autonomy.
4. **Justice:** Be fair. Treat like cases alike.
5. **Confidentiality:** Respecting personal information.

When Confidentiality Can Be Breached

- **Duty to Protect:** When you pose a serious threat to others.

- **Duty to Report:** unsafe drivers, child protection, certain sexually transmitted infections.
- **Court Order.**
- **Minors and others who rely on others to provide consent.**

Who has access to your records?

1. Your physician's professional staff.
2. Other healthcare providers involved in your care (your hospital team, specialists to whom you are referred).
3. 3rd parties (insurance companies, lawyers) with your written consent (or by court order).

Informed Consent requires:

1. Sufficient information about the benefits, risks and alternatives of a test, procedure or drug before you can choose or refuse it.
2. An individual capable of understanding the situation and the available options and able to make and communicate a decision.

Preventive Bioethics

With proactive reflection and discussion, future ethical dilemmas may be avoided.

1. Anticipate the future when you may be incapable of medical decision-making and suffering from serious illness.
2. Understand the benefits and burdens of CPR, artificial feeding and artificial ventilation.
3. Consider what gives your life meaning and what constitutes a good quality of life.
4. Communicate your values and your wishes while you can. Ensure your family knows what you would want.

An **Advance Directive** is a statement of what kind of medical care you would want in the event that you are unable to make your own decisions.

- *What procedures do you want?*
- *What procedures do you refuse?*
 - *Under what conditions?*
- *Who do you choose to make decisions for you?*

For Example:

You may not wish to have CPR (chest compressions, assisted breathing, a tube down your throat, electric paddles on the chest) if you had an irreversible, terminal condition with no hope for a return to an acceptable quality of life (by your standards).

You may not wish to be kept alive on machines if you were in a persistent coma with no hope of recovery.

For more information: google “My Voice”

<http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2013/MyVoice-AdvanceCarePlanningGuide.pdf>

More articles on Empowering Patients can be found at [FETCH \(For Everything That's Community Health\)](http://sc.fetchbc.ca) sc.fetchbc.ca

Note: This article was written by Dr. Davidicus Wong and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Sunshine Coast Division of Family Practice

Please share this information with your family, friends and anyone else who may find it helpful.

Together we'll create a healthier community and a healthier future.