Surgical Ethics Symposium “Ethical Dilemmas in Surgical Practice”

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Published online: 21 April 2014
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Traditionally, surgeons have equated excellence in the delivery of surgical care with the performance of a technically impeccable operation. This feeling permeated through the training of surgeons; it was learned by residents and subsequently exhibited during the years of practice. The intense focus on the technical aspects of surgery also established the basis for the surgeon's relationship to patients and to society's perception of surgeons as relatively cold and non-engaging individuals. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Institute of Medicine published a landmark report that redefined Quality of Care as the “provision of care that is safe, effective, efficient, timely and patient centered for all those who are in need” [1]. This concept places the patient and the patient's needs at the center of the equation. For us as surgeons, it expands the concept of ‘impeccable technique during the performance of an operation’ to one that encompasses the integration of all the needs of the patient and his/her immediate family. This requires the development of an additional set of skills by surgeons, including appropriate communication abilities, knowledge of ethical guidelines and principles, and the incorporation of those principles into the practice of surgery. It emphasizes the moral practice of surgery and it makes the surgeon a moral agent.

This issue of the *World Journal of Surgery* is devoted to surgical ethics, theory and practice. Theoretical ethics attempts to understand the underlying basis, assumptions,

and implications of ethical systems, while practical ethics relates to the application of ethical standards to everyday practice. This symposium is intended to provide surgeons with a thorough and deep practical insight in this field.

The tenets of a modern competent surgeon include the following characteristics: (1) good clinical skills and appropriate surgical judgment; (2) good technical skills, including knowledge of and expertise in the performance of operations; (3) knowledge and practice of humanism, ethics, and solid moral values. Ethics, therefore, lies at the core of professionalism: a proficient surgeon is considered to be not only competent to perform the art and science of surgery as traditionally understood but also ethically and morally reliable. In fact, surgical decision making can be viewed as a two- part process: the ‘how to treat’ aspect, which is a matter of surgical science, and the ‘why to treat’ issues, which are a matter of surgical ethics and should be based in moral philosophy. When deciding on ‘why to treat’, surgical ethics provides us four principles: beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for patient autonomy, and justice.

In a nutshell, the ethical practice of surgery implies dignity, tolerance, and respect, and as such it means (1) placing the welfare and rights of the patients above one's own; (2) treating each patient as one would wish to be treated; (3) valuing each individual; and (4) doing unto others as one would have them do unto us.

From the principles expressed above, some basic rights inherent to patients who are in need of surgery emerge:

- the right to be adequately informed about the benefits and risks of the proposed surgical treatment
- the right to be treated by a competent surgeon
- the right to have his or her health valued higher than the surgeon's own economic interest

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- the right to decide whether to accept treatment
- the right not to be killed intentionally or negligently
- the right not to be harmed by intent or negligence
- the right not to be deceived.

If we follow the principles and the rights outlined above, it becomes clear that the surgeon–patient relationship is based on fiduciarism rather than characterized by a contract. In this relationship, the surgeon carries a role ‘as authority’ by virtue of training, expertise, wisdom, and concern for the patient while the patient holds a position ‘in authority’, able to consent and thus allowing that an operation upon him or her be done.

The articles that compose this symposium on ‘Ethical Dilemmas in Surgical Practice’ were written by surgeons of different origin, age, and expertise. The symposium is

intended to provide useful tools and insights that should help deal with problems that arise in everyday practice.

The guest editors, Peter Angelos and Alberto Ferreres, are experienced surgeons and experts in surgical ethics. The distinguished coauthors have done an outstanding job putting together great ideas that provide the foundations and the tools needed for the average surgeon in practice.

Reference

1. Committee on Quality of Health Care in America, Institute of Medicine (2001) Crossing the quality chasm: a new health system for the 21st century. National Academy Press, Washington, DC