Article Summary

Recognizing the Importance and Complexity of Ethics in Pediatric Neurology


Overview

This essay reflects on the importance of making sure that new doctors are being trained in ethics as well as medicine. Ethics (or ‘doing the right thing’) is based on a few guiding principles, such as: valuing personal autonomy (the right of individuals to make their own decisions), doing well, and doing what is fair (making sure everyone has equal access to health services, for example). Ethical issues are complicated and often lead to conflict.

Ethical issues are particularly important in medicine because doctors are given a lot of authority and the decisions they make are often long-term and life-changing. Ethical situations can become even more complicated when the patient is a child with a neurological condition. We consider children unable to make decisions for themselves and some neurological issues affect the parts of the brain that are needed to make informed decisions. In some neurological disorders, patients will never be able to make informed decisions, even as they age. When children are very young or are developmentally delayed their parents serve as proxies (stand-ins) and make decisions for them. As children age they become more able to make decisions on their own. Doctors need to take this into account when deciding on treatment. At the end of the day, everyone’s goal (the parents, the doctors etc.) must be to do what is in the best interests of the child. Hospitals and medical boards have procedures in place to ensure that doctors are behaving ethically, but these procedures must always be accompanied by a personal desire to do the ‘right’ thing.

What parents should know

- Ethical issues are never cut and dry. Doctors must follow basic ethical principles while treating each situation as unique.
• Ethical issues with children are more complicated because children are considered unable to make their own decisions. In almost all cases, this means that their parents, acting as their child’s proxy (stand-in), will have to make decisions in their child’s place. This changes over time, as children age and become more able to make decisions about their medical care, unless the child has a neurological disorder that prevents them from ever being able to make their own decisions.
• Doctors are trained in medical ethics, and hospitals and medical boards have rules in place to make sure that doctors behave ethically.

What practitioners should know

• Ethics are an important component of medicine, and doctors should be aware of ethical principles and the type of circumstances that make these issues complex.
• Doctors should also make themselves aware of the institutional procedures in place to ensure ethical practices.
• Doctors should be particularly conscious of the added ethical complexity involved in treating children, especially those with neurological conditions.