

# Medical Ethics: Understanding, Teaching and Practice

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## Abstract

Ethics is a word derived from the Greek '*ethikos*' which means a study of the principles of living. Ethics now has become to mean 'a set of rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession'. Medical Ethics deals with the moral principles that medics should follow in their professional life. The scope of medical ethics is wide and inclusive of developing codes and guidelines, promoting ethical practices and preventing ethical breaches. It also includes the physicians' relationship with patients, colleagues, members of the related industry, and at large, the society and the nation or the state. Ethical environment pays in terms of good standards, fine practices and special care by physicians. Essential elements of this environment are professional competence, good collegial and patient relationship along with compliance of other professional and ethical obligations.

Fast-moving societal and technological changes in the 21st century are restructuring the Health profession. These drifts will have a particular impact on the preparation of health care professionals, especially physicians. The volume of medical knowledge is increasing. The range and complexity of treatment options are widening. At the same time, community requirements and expectations from physicians have been amplified. To meet these rising demands, health care professionals must learn the skills to critically analyze new developments, keep abreast with the developments of their field, practice on the basis of the best evidence available and be able to explain and justify their advice to patients. Apart from acquiring knowledge and skills, proper morals, dedication, altruism, and sympathy without discrimination are crucial components of a medic's life.

Ethical issues related to medical education, practice and research entail a clear understanding of the importance of trust, integrity, honesty, and effective and fair communication in all professional relations. A health care professional must understand his personal responsibility, limitations of cognitive and psychomotor skills, when, where and how to seek appropriate help and uphold professional boundaries with patients. A medic should comprehend issues related to the religious beliefs and practices of patients, students and other healthcare professionals. He must recognize and avoid all forms of unfair discrimination and areas of potential conflict of interest in practice. Physicians must appropriately respond to clinical errors, adverse incidents and firmly adhere to their fiduciary responsibility.

Medical knowledge and Islamic scholarship have been interrelated for centuries, whereby moral and ethical values based on Islamic principles have served as guidelines to medical professionals in letter and spirit. Medical ethics draws its essence from Islamic teachings, which call for honesty, sound performance, and fear of God. The Islamic concept of medical ethics entails social and communal norms within the frame work of *Sariah*, commonly recognized as noble characteristics and upright traditions. The teaching of medical ethics demands comprehensive curriculum with incorporation of Islamic perspective at graduate and postgraduate levels. Medical practice needs sound understanding of contemporary medical education and research. While conversant, competent and righteous doctors are in a position to achieve enormous rewards, to carry out any medical practice without knowing right from wrong is unsafe and unethical. Mishaps may take place leading to serious consequences. The Islamic ethical principles are much more profound and comprehensive than the Western principles. The Western concepts do not have legal bindings and roots in the history of jurisprudence. The breaches may not be sometimes punishable in a court of law there. While in Islamic injunctions, ethics are an essential part of law and violations are punishable.

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## **Introduction**

It has become mandatory for all medics including clinicians, researchers, medical administrators and epidemiologists to familiarize themselves with a correct understanding of ethical issues to deal with patients from a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural upbringings. The clinical encounter certainly is influenced by the cultural backgrounds of both clinicians and patients. In current scenario, cultural competency is in focus while acquiring and implementing knowledge-based skills aiming at behavioral adjustment. Those who intend to run an ethical practice need to acquire behavioral skills and adjust themselves in the emerging situation in the discourse of patient – physician relationship. Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is inherently linked with morality as it pursues to define the “right and wrong” and the “good and bad” sets of behaviors in given circumstances. In an Islamic perspective ethical concerns are rigorously defined and based on the five purposes of Law, ‘*maqasid al shari’ah*’. The five purposes are: the preservation of the *Din* (religion), life, progeny, intellect, and wealth. In Islamic medical ethics: any medical action will be considered ethical if it fulfills one or more purposes of *shari’ah*. In addition, basic ethical principles relevant to the medical practice must also be adhered to, namely: intention (*qasd*), certainty (*yaqeen*), harm (*dharar*), hardship (*mushaqat*); custom or precedent (*urf*). The Islamic ethical principles are much comprehensive and deeper than the Western principles. More over in western concepts ethics do not carry legal and penal bindings, and breaches may not be punishable in a court of law. Whereas in Islam, ethics are at times an essential part of law and violations are punishable. These and many other concepts are inter-related and may augment each other in different situations.

## **Understanding ethical issues in Medical practice**

Rapidly developing medical sciences lead to a quicker and more precise understanding of pathological processes. On the other hand medical fraternity is depending on technological advancements and this dependency is rapidly growing. Our physicians now manage a patient with lesser morbidity and faster recovery. This has happened owing to the intensive contributions made in the patient care industry. Eagerness for profit and enhanced profit earning are related to the industrial revolution, and, therefore, are also decoded in the industry related to medical

practice and patient management. This phenomenon leads to influence decision making by the medical doctors and many a time creates a conflict of interest and sometimes may jeopardize the fundamental values of medicine which obliges a doctor to keep the patient’s interest above everything else. On the other hand this fact cannot be ignored that there is an increasing dissatisfaction on the part of the patients who are expecting more and more from doctors. It has led to bringing in piles of complaints. The Medical profession once considered noble, is now taken only like any other money making professions. Liability is fixed, damages are claimed. One cannot totally refute the allegations that modern medicine is becoming more impersonal, and with the increasing dependence on technology, it is becoming very costly too. A large number of patients in developing countries do not have any access to the modern health care system. It is necessary now that we adhere to the ethical principles to safeguard the interest of the patients, and maintain the integrity and pride of medical profession. A framework used in the analysis of medical ethics is based on "four principles" judged and weighed against each other, and the scope of their application is studied closely. These principles are: autonomy, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficance. Others are added up like confidentiality, respect for persons, honesty, double effects, informed consent, conflict of interest, etc., and many more.

The Islamic regulation is of two types: devotional obligations like prayers and fasting; and relationship with others and the ways they should be treated. The Prophet of Islam (Peace Be upon Him) said “any one of you would not be truly faithful unless he loves for others what he loves for himself”, This Hadith makes it clear that Islam has a great interest in building mutual relationships between the members of society. The ethics and morality encompasses all aspects of life and relates it very clearly to the belief system and laws of Islam. The concept of worship do not remain with individuals but essentially extend to relationship with others, and the society at large. Therefore, Islam does not merely emphasize on following its ethical teachings, but violation of Islamic ethical values may generate rules to regulate behavior and punish violations. Islam considers medical ethics in the same way as it does in other spheres of life. Thus ethics become a part of law and Islamic law is a compendium of ethics, morality and legal rules. The perception of ethics in Islam can also be clarified through its comparison with some philosophical theories. One of these is the obligation-based or

deontological theory, which holds that morality is the human act based on certain ideals generally agreed. It is based on duty and would not consider utility, desire or affection. Based on this theory utility is totally not considered in judging the ethicality of an action. The other example is of utilitarian theory. It affirms that the measure of the ethicality of an action is its utility and consequences, but not its intention. This theory was modified, but recently it has been criticized for its shortcomings. It failed to stand as an appropriate theory in different situations. Many a time Islam did clearly affirm that non malfesance is not accepted. There is a well-known principle of Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) which is derived from the Hadith, that: "Do not inflict any harm". Also, Islam considered justice and malfesance in a very strong and effective statement in the Holly Quran that reads: **Verily, Allâh enjoins Al- Adl (i.e. justice) and Al-Ihsân (beneficence) [i.e. to be just and patient and beneficent in performing your duties<sup>1</sup>]**. At another place it is said, **'We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure, and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of our creation' (Alisra':70)**. One can say that Islamic medical ethics theory is a comprehensive and coherent theory. There are no significant contradictions between different principles, it can be easily understood and applied in practice and if any contradictions exist, they can be easily resolved. Islamic medical ethics is concerned with all aspects of medical practice. This includes professionalism, professional relations, health care professional character, conduct and accountability, as well as opinions on contemporary issues in medical practice and research, both in basic and clinical sciences and even about animals.

### **Teaching Medical Ethics**

Teaching medical students is a robust scientific process. This involves the development of medical faculty. Faculty cannot be developed unless they acquire an understanding of the teaching and learning process in a new milieu. Medical ethics is not an essential part of curriculum at several medical schools both nationally and internationally. Many professional bodies and universities have so far stressed the importance of teaching medical ethics and vouched to make it a critical part of medical curriculum at under graduate and higher levels. At the same time a

number of obstacles exist against medical ethics education at graduate levels.

Teaching professionalism and Medical Ethics has only recently been introduced even in the developed world. It is still missing from the medical curricula of many medical schools. The majority of the medical schools in the west that address professionalism do so during orientation, often in a "white-coat ceremony" designed to symbolize the matriculating students' induction into the medical profession while a number of schools in the west incorporate professionalism as a component of multiple courses. Less than a third of the medical schools in the west teach professionalism in a single course or as an integrated sequence of courses. There is no comprehensive data available about medical schools: how professionalism and medical ethics are being taught at different levels of under and post graduate medical education. We designed a holistic integration of medical curriculum with medical ethics and professionalism for every year of graduate programs while similar assimilation continues at post graduate residency programs. As a part of graduate program the study of medical ethics spreads over five years. In the first two years, a general understanding of ethics, its importance, human behavior, disease and its perception, inter-personal relationships and general conduct and behavior of medics are being integrated with all modules from foundation to the final. In the third year patient- physician relationships, the ethics of clinical practice and relationship with allied specialties and patients' rights are included. In the fourth year ethics of human and animal research and relationship with pharmaceutical and associated industries are inculcated. In the final year contemporary issues and ethical concerns, medical jurisprudence and characteristics of physicians are being integrated with different modules and during clinical clerkship. More detailed studies of professional ethics as a science and research subject are under view. At all levels beliefs and moralities are finely integrated to meet the requirements of a particular society. Assessments of professionalism are designed with the end block examinations in the form of MCQs, SEQs and Integrated Practical Assessments (IPA), Modified OSCEs, peers review and work place evaluation.

### **Practice of Ethics**

Professional ethics for physicians subscribe to the body of ethical statement developed primarily in the best interest of patients. Therefore, it must be first and

foremost responsibility of a physician to safe-guard the interests of patients, other health care professionals, self and society at large. Physicians must adhere to the basic ethical frame work like this: Dedication in providing competent medical care, taking care of compassion and respect for human dignity, upholding the standards of professionalism, being honest in all professional interactions. One must respect law, right of the patient, colleagues, and other health professionals, continuously upgrade his knowledge, skills and maintain a commitment to medical education, and must provide cutting edge medical care to the patients. A physician must contribute in activities towards the improvement of community and public health at a larger scale, support access to medical care for all people and use the talents of other health professionals when volunteered for the improvement of health care of the society. Islamic law is a compendium of ethics, morality and legal rules. Islam considers medical ethics as in other spheres of life. The Muslim physician is supposed to follow the same rules and principles that all members in the society follow. In order to ensure the happiness and goodness of life, man needs to refer to the code of ethics to monitor his relationship with his Creator, with his family, with other fellow men in society, with other creatures of the universe, and even with his innermost self. Islamic way of life demands abiding the code of ethics because negligence of it would lead to the deviation and going astray from the straight path of Islam. Therefore, Islamic ethics is vividly vital because it is a basic pillar for a healthy society. It aims at establishing life's order and giving it regulation, dignity and serenity as desired by the teachings of Islam. All Muslim physicians must develop and live by personal attributes like these: *Sincerity, Honesty, Truthfulness, Compassion & Sympathy, Patience & Tolerance and Humility*. Apart from that he has duties towards his patients like safeguarding the public interest, practice the profession to the highest possible level of knowledge, expertise, truthfulness and honesty. The professional has to keep abreast with advances made in his specialization. He should care for community health through proper health education, contribute in improving the health services of the community at all levels, actively participate in medical research and surveys that yield benefit to the community and being a good listener to a patient's complaints and understanding his suffering, avoidance of arrogance or contempt towards the patient or dealing with him as an object of ridicule or mockery, whatever his educational showing utmost

respect towards the patients, examining the patient gently, observing the "patient undressing code", and limiting the examination to the necessary parts of the body to reach a proper diagnosis. He is obliged to exerting utmost care in writing medical reports that serve the right purpose. He should neither exaggerate nor diminish the problem, abstaining from committing infringements of religious rules, such as staying alone with a woman behind closed doors or inspecting the genitalia as such, alone, under the pretext of doctor-patient relationship. He should refer the patient to another physician who can provide specialized treatment, if he is unable to provide it himself. He must furnish the necessary information needed for the treatment of the patient when he refers him to another physician. He should help the patient in obtaining the necessary reports and information, should the patient seek the opinion of another physician in respect of his illness and allow the patient to consult an alternative physician. He should be prescribing continuous, quality medical care to patients with terminal or incurable diseases until the last moments in their lives, ensuring safety of patient's records including electronic, etc. He should be well versed in the realities related to consent of the patient in various situations. The Islamic medical ethics are comprehensive, have clear principles that are robust as well as flexible. Islamic medical ethics have responded clearly to many contemporary medical issues with a significant contribution. The intellectual and legal heritage is a valuable source of ethical guidelines and must be made accessible to others while making ethical decisions.

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