

The Universality of Ethics for Health Care Professionals

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On the 29th May 1997, the Nursing and Midwifery Professions had their Code of Ethics published by the Nursing and Midwifery Board. This was done in accordance with the provisions made under the Department of Health (Constitution) Ordinance (Cap. 94) which provides that: -

“The Board will prescribe and maintain professional and ethical standards for Nurses and Midwives”.

This publication was a much-awaited step in the right direction and was very much required for the recognition of the Nursing and Midwifery professions and for them to be able to regulate themselves. The Code itself deals with universal principles of ethical and moral behaviour. These principles cannot be perceived as being principles of law typical of the “Thou shall not” type of commandments, but as principles that transcend law itself. Ethical principles are above the law because of their universality which renders them applicable to the whole of mankind.

Ethical principles do not state or declare the obvious but only point to what should be done. This is Ethics – the science of disposition. The Greek Philosopher Aristotle adopted the Greek word–‘*Ethos*’ as the key word because it means ‘an abode’ or ‘dwelling place’ signifying the interior attitudes and the disposition of the person and the communication of those attitudes/disposition to others. This prescribed behaviour is not just an outward manifestation of human behaviour, but is more akin to a teleological type of human behaviour, i.e. from the Greek word ‘*telos*’—behaviour with an aim or purpose. Ethical conduct wholly revolves around the fundamental question of “who should I be?” Nurses and Midwives or other health care professionals should all strive to develop a “good character”’— a character which is

able to exercise freedom of choice in favour of the good of the patients/clients, the profession, co-workers and society at large. A person in the capacity of a health care professional who possesses a good character, is one who acts at the right and opportune time, in the right way and according to the right reason. According to Aristotle, in order for man to achieve “eudaemonia” (happiness & self-fulfilment) he needs to have this good character or live the ‘virtuous life’. This ‘virtuous life’ is not one with religious, saintly and ascetic connotations. It is a ‘life’ based upon principles associated with the delivery of excellent care, a ‘life’ based upon a rational, scientific and balanced way of choosing, and a ‘life’ full of action driven by a vision (the good of the patient — ‘an optimal state of physical, psychological and social well-being [WHO definition of Health]).

Educating the person’s disposition towards a rational emotionality and emotional rationality develops this ‘virtuous life’. These ethical principles facilitate the free decision process undertaken by these professionals, which process is always based upon rationality. The actual execution of ethical principles in the Code of Ethics presupposes the existence of a number of good character traits that can all be developed from a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). The ability to exercise freedom of choice leads to self-determination and to behavioural consistency. All of this leads to a certain internalised strength, manifest commitment and professional reliability. Coupled with a vision, the health care practitioner shapes his character according to his/her purpose (*telos*) or vision – the good of the patient. Eventually the ‘ethical’ health care professional is to be trusted to act habitually in a good way, even if there is no one to observe and praise him and feels as if he or she is violating his/her beliefs if he or she does not act in this manner.

The cultivation of these principles is not automatic. As a basic prerequisite, cognisance of these published principles is of utmost importance. The Nursing and Midwifery Board has distributed more than 2000 copies of the Code of Ethics to Nurses and Midwives. Quite recently, since the appointment of the new Director of Nursing, this Code has found itself on the Internet (on the Directorate’s webpage or

NMB webpage) and can be downloaded as a *pdf* file for any interested party in the World. But surely this is not enough. It is of vital importance that all nurses and midwives read and practise the principles stated in the Code of Ethics. Adherence to such principles is not always easy and in the course of our practice, dilemmas often threaten the ultimate objective why such ethical principles exist after all.

The age of ethical absolutism is over and ethical relativism and utilitarianism has infiltrated the thinking of many contemporary philosophers. We are passing from the 'Ethics of Certainty' to the 'Ethics of Uncertainty'. Issues that confront health care professionals on a day-to-day basis include the prolongation of life versus escalating medical costs, high technology treatments versus rationing, life expectancy versus quality of life, fighting versus accepting death. Such bioethical issues confound the health care professionals seriously because whilst on one hand I spoke about the absolute character of the patient's/society's good, one simply cannot ignore economic issues. People at the helm of the delivery of health care have to be wise enough to be able to achieve an equitable medical rationing for the widest possible benefit of people. One issue that comes to my mind is this: is it ethical to have only small amounts of funds allocated to health promotion which benefit the population at large while at the same time having a heavy investment for the needs of people who smoked and lived an irresponsible life? I cannot offer any answers because there are no clear answers. Health care professionals, including people who manage health care systems, have to live with these dilemmas trying to achieve equitable and optimal solutions.

What lies ahead? What is the future for delivery of health care in Malta? I believe that the development of the 'virtuous life' of the health care professional is something that can be common for all health care professionals. It should be their vision towards the attainment of the optimum delivery of health care for the good of the patient/client, the welfare of society at large, the public profile of their respective profession and their colleagues. These principles are by their very

nature universal and thus applicable to all. Isn't it time for all health care professionals including doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, occupational therapists, social workers, dentists etc to adopt a single code of ethics underlying these fundamental principles explained previously?

I believe that this is the way forward.