

# **Ethical Issues in Family Practice: Future Perspectives**

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We live in an age where ethical issues are becoming ever more significant. This has been the result of recent advances in medical research in many areas of medicine particularly those that relate to early human development, including stem cell research, which is currently ushering a revolution in our thinking about therapeutic modalities. Likewise, genetic research and pharmacogenetics in particular promise to revolutionise our practice in relation to use of medical products. Not least, we see a fundamental change in the expectations of our patients who now demand to be treated as equals by their treating doctors, and not as passive receptors of medical largesse.

For this and many other reasons, ethics has become an urgent imperative that needs to be tackled by all health professionals. We cannot any longer ignore the need to familiarise ourselves with the issues raised and discussed in current ethical literature. We have to be familiar with the problems, and devise mechanisms of solving them.

It is for this reason that the British Medical Association has recently published a Handbook on *The Medical Profession and Human Rights* (2001), which encapsulates issues relating to human abuses worldwide. It makes a very strong plea for ensuring that medical ethics is taught in medical schools as a compulsory subject, because, as it well says, "Doctors need to have skills in moral reasoning to reach a justifiable balance between conflicting moral imperatives and the duties owed to both individual patients and society at large. It requires objectivity and access to sources of sound ethical advice" (p 8). A more detailed resume relating to this topic was published in the Bioethics Newsletter last October. This is also one reason why it is so

disturbing that our University Medical School still finds it unnecessary to have formal ethics teaching to medical students, a topic which has found its way as a compulsory subject in most of the medical schools in Europe.

The Bioethics Consultative Committee endeavours to ensure that the topics of bioethics is kept at the forefront. Organisation of conferences of this kind, in collaboration with bodies such as, in this case, the College of Family Doctors, and the Malta Chamber of Pharmacists, enable us to share our ideas with practitioners in the field, a process which hopefully will be found beneficial to all those who participate. We have been publishing these proceedings regularly for the last five years, and we hope that we shall continue along these lines in the future. As I am sure you are aware, we also publish the Newsletter which I mentioned earlier, and which is distributed to all family doctors and now also pharmacists and other health professionals. I would like at this point to make a plea to you to participate also in this exercise, by sending your comments and points of view. Finally, we try to reach the general public through participation in radio programmes, such as the one currently organised by Dr Pierre Mallia and Dr Janet Mifsud on University Radio, as well as by writing articles of relevance to the daily papers.

I believe that the issues to be tackled in this conference are of considerable interest and importance. They cover a broad range of topics dealing with the family doctor and pharmacist within our changing society, emphasising the role of the individual practitioner, the speciality, as well as aspects of research and collaboration in tertiary care.