

ETHIKOS FOR MEDICOS

By Sanjay Sahay for ELL

Introduction

Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. Ethics permeates life, culture, society and civilization. Its been so, since times immemorial. This is the touchstone of every profession. Man by his very nature finds difficult to handle un codified moral knowledge by way of norms, mores, customs and conventions. This lead to the codification of ethics in various spheres and consequently the creation of much more concrete code of conduct, which could be enforced. The noblest of the professions undeniably has its own share of medical ethics literature. The first code of medical ethics, Formula Comitit Archiatrorum, was published in the 5th century, during the reign of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great. Since then there has been a battle of attrition between the ethical and the others and continues even to this day.

History of right and wrong

Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC) was one of the first Greek philosophers to encourage both scholars and the common citizen to turn their attention from the outside world to the condition of humankind. In this view, knowledge having a bearing on human life was placed highest, all other knowledge being secondary. Self-knowledge was considered necessary for success and inherently an essential good. A self-aware person will act completely within his capabilities to his pinnacle, while an ignorant person will flounder and encounter difficulty. To Socrates, a person must become aware of every fact (and its context) relevant to his existence, if he wishes to attain self-knowledge. He posited that people will naturally do what is good, if they know what is right. Evil or bad actions are the result of ignorance. If a criminal were truly aware of the mental and spiritual consequences of his actions, he would neither commit nor even consider committing those actions. Any person who knows what is truly right will automatically do it, according to Socrates. While he correlated knowledge with virtue, he similarly equated virtue with happiness. The truly wise man will know what is right, do what is good, and therefore be happy.

The Hippocratic Oath

The Hippocratic Oath is an oath historically taken by physicians, physician assistants and other healthcare professionals swearing to practice medicine ethically and honestly. It is widely believed to have been written by Hippocrates. Its talks about all the ideals which a medical practitioner should follow. This art should treat patients as children, prescribe never to harm, not give a woman a pessary to cause an abortion, surgery would be left to specialists, keeping oneself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction and confidentiality. What is really critical to this oath is its prophetic nature so aptly written in the last line which reads "If I keep this oath faithfully, may I enjoy my life and practice my art, respected by all humanity and in all times; but if I swerve from it or violate it, may the reverse be my life."

From the days of the Hippocratic Oath till today has been a long roller coaster ride of the medical ethics thoughts, codification, enforcement, violations, rectification and the like, a general principle of societal development. Consumerism completely changed the rules of the game.

Consumerism

Consumerism added a totally new dimension to the nature of medical services which was being rendered in this country and worldwide. It became a double edged sword. customer demands on the medical services were reaching insatiable levels given the nature of infrastructure and also the experience, expertise and attitude of the medical professionals. On the other hand the law provided the real tooth to the end user. The law provided for the protection of consumers from hazards of their health and safety and availability of effective consumer redress. What we fail to do as profession, the law finally forces it to be enforced. The enactment of the Consumer Protection Act of 1986 changed the rules of game in favor of the consumers, making quality services enforceable and the non-delivery penal. The doctors have to respond to the new reality, failing to do so, endangers the health of the profession itself.

Enterprise Level

Merck's mission statement says "We are in business of preserving and improving human life. All our actions must be measured by the success in achieving this goal." Noble indeed. But today's how many of world's pharmaceuticals companies follow these principles? If they did world would have been a much better place to live. Though lot

of emphasis is being given to the front end, the medical professionals, the back end and the processing part actually does the maximum disservice to the patient. The business of medicine and huge capital costs of medical infrastructure and maintenance with the grandiose designs of profits maximization has made the medical fraternity a tool in their hands. They are able to play even with the attitudes of the medical professionals. The food and drug administration has also not played a proactive role to stem this rot. One end of the spectrum is the corporatization of hospitals and on the other side is the capitalism of medical education. Yet we have deliver, what can be poetically said, the woods are lovely, dark and deep but we have many promises to keep. This is the scenario we are faced with today.

Medical profession at crossroads

Medical profession with its super specialization does not leave much scope of non real professionals to survive. As in nature so in life, it is the survival of the fittest. There is valuable message embedded in this statement. Every one of you has to become a professional, who can survive only on your professional skills and nothing else. This is a tall order. Though we have best of the Doctors and also an excellent medical infrastructure yet present business model of the nexus between the manufacturers of medicines and equipments, the diagnostic world and the medico has been becoming a threat to the public health of the nation. The Hippocratic Oath is an oath historically taken by doctors and other healthcare professionals swearing to practice medicine ethically.

Public health

On the public health of the nation is dependent the productive capabilities of the nation. It is difficult to believe that the developed nations would be as developed if they were not able to bring public health in the social welfare sector. A healthy nation is the biggest asset on which the country can build on. Our performance of internationally accepted parameters is abysmal to say the least in most of the areas related to individual health. What is human life without good health? I have lived in Sudan for a year I know what it means.

Back to society

We owe it to the society which has brought us here. If we cannot repay to the society which has made you professional that too in your own area of work, by way of

taking out bit of time, energy and may be some money for this purpose, then what meaning does life have for you? You learn the human art of giving and then you realize the satisfaction you derive out of this. If you can bring back a smile on somebody's face, you are the most successful person on earth.

Conclusion

Medical ethics is not negotiable given the nature of medical profession and the only way out of the morass the medical profession is in, is a complete attitudinal change with corresponding changes in all the relevant areas of medical services. A roadmap with is long and arduous, nonetheless, achievable. The country deserves quality service from its medical fraternity.

THANK YOU FOR HAVING GIVEN A PATIENT HEARING.

Reading list:

1. Wikipedia articles on
 - Ethics
 - Medical Ethics
 - Consumer Protection Act of 1986
2. Build To Last by Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras
3. Doctors in the Dock by JVN Jaiswal

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