Enhancing Bioethics Education: Addressing Challenges Old and New

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Abstract

Medical students and educators are facing rising bioethical challenges that they need to address. In particular, a series of new, technologies have been dramatically altering almost every aspect of modern life, including medicine, posing profound questions regarding patients’ autonomy and rights, risks, benefits and justice. Abilities to keep patients alive longer in a coma pose questions of futility. Genomics can aid diagnosis and treatment of many disorders, but most doctors feel ill-prepared to discuss with patients the complex testing and disclosure dilemmas involved. Electronic medical records can aid health care and research, but pose quandaries about privacy, confidentiality, and data access by health, life and disability insurance companies. New assisted reproductive technologies (e.g. PGD/NIPD/CRISPR) can change reproductive planning, but raise moral conundrums about altering future generations. Increased longevity in many industrialized countries is leading to rising prevalence of Alzheimer’s disease. New drugs and devices can help patients, but are heightening medical costs. The spread of new infectious diseases such as SARS, Ebola, and Zika require emergency responses and preparedness, raising questions of resource allocation. We need to prepare medical students and physicians to confront and communicate with patients effectively about these and other issues. Yet, physicians are often poorly-equipped to do so. This talk will explore these challenges and ways of addressing them. Bioethics education is critical, but must train students to adapt and respond, not by memorizing “facts,” but by thinking critically. Effective approaches include case-based discussions, and enhancing students’ appreciation of the needs to address these domains well. This talk will explore beneficial strategies, illuminating how bioethics education can best prepare students for these evolving, critical challenges.