

WMA RESOLUTION ON THE INCLUSION OF MEDICAL ETHICS AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CURRICULUM OF MEDICAL SCHOOLS WORLD-WIDE

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PREAMBLE

Medical School curricula are designed to prepare medical students to enter the profession of medicine. Increasingly, in addition to core biomedical and clinical knowledge, they teach skills including critical appraisal and reflective practice. These additional skills help to enable future doctors to understand and assess the importance of published research evidence, and how to evaluate their own practice against norms and standards set nationally and internationally.

In much the way same that anatomy, physiology and biochemistry are a solid base for understanding the human body, how it works, how it can fail or otherwise go wrong, and how different mechanisms can be used to repair damaged structure and functions, there is a clear need for physicians in training to understand the social, cultural and environmental contexts within which they will practice. This includes a solid understanding of the social determinants of health.

Medical ethics includes the social contract made between the health care professions and the societies they serve, based upon established principles, on the limits that apply to medical practice It also establishes a system or set of principles through which new treatments or other clinical interventions will be sieved before decisions are made on whether elements are acceptable within medical practice. There is a complex intermingling of medical ethics and the duties of physicians to patients, and the rights patients enjoy as citizens.

At the same time physicians face challenges and opportunities in relation to the human rights of their patients and of populations, for example occasions for imposing treatments without consent, and will also often be the first to observe and to itemize the infringement of these rights by others, including the state. This places very specific responsibilities upon the observing physician.

Physicians have a duty to use their knowledge to improve the wellbeing and health of patients and the population. This will mean considering social and societal change, including legislation and regulation, and can only be done well if doctors can take a holistic view within clinical and ethical parameters.

Physicians should press government to ensure legislation supports principled medical practice.

Given the core nature of health care ethics in establishing medical practice in a manner that is acceptable to society and that does not violate civil, political and other human rights, it is essential that all physicians are trained to perform an ethics evaluation of every clinical scenario they may encounter, while simultaneously understanding their role in protecting the rights of individuals.

Physicians' ability to act and communicate in a way that respects the values of the individual patient is a prerequisite for successful treatment. Physicians must also be able to work effectively in teams with other health care professionals including other physicians.

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Failures of individual physicians to recognize the ethical obligations they owe patients and communities can damage the reputation of doctors both locally and globally. Therefore it is essential that all doctors are taught to understand and respect medical ethics and human rights from the beginning of their medical school careers.

In many countries ethics and human rights are an integral part of the medical curriculum, but this is not universal. Too often teaching is undertaken by volunteers, and can fail if those volunteers are unable or unavailable to teach, or if that teaching is unduly idiosyncratic or inadequately based upon clinical scenarios.

The teaching of medical ethics should become an obligatory and examined part of the medical curriculum within every medical school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The WMA urges that medical ethics and human rights be taught at every medical school as obligatory and examined parts of the curriculum, and should continue at all stages of post graduate medical education and continuing professional development.
2. The WMA believes that medical schools should seek to ensure that they have sufficient faculty skilled at teaching ethical enquiry and human rights to make these courses sustainable.
3. The WMA commends the inclusion of medical ethics and human rights within post graduate and continuing medical education.