

# Medical Ethics Today. The BMA's Handbook of Ethics and Law

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With rapid advances in science and technology modern healthcare gives rise to complex multidimensional dilemmas that the physician is not fully equipped to handle. Furthermore, in many countries, physician autonomy has been restrained by governments and other authorities enforcing controls on medical practitioners, adding to the many issues they are confronted with. Physicians are challenged with questions on behavior and decision-making as frequently as scientific and technical ones on an almost daily basis in current medical practice. It is therefore not surprising that the BMA's *Handbook of Ethics and Law* goes beyond a simple guidebook or manual and is a voluminous comprehensive sourcebook of around 1 000 pages covering almost every eventuality that physicians could face in the practice of healthcare.

This book, which sets out to bridge the gap between theory and practice, comprises 21 chapters and 3 appendices. The latter are the Hippocratic Oath, the Declaration of Geneva and the Declaration of a New Doctor, as devised by Imperial College School of Medicine graduating year of 2001. It is interesting to note the Declaration from Imperial College introduces a positive duty on physicians to assist patients with developing agency. It also establishes the advocacy role of physicians in the context of human rights violations, the need to strive to change laws that are contrary to professional ethics and work towards a fairer distribution of health resources.

The book starts off with a section that describes what medical ethics is and leads into a framework of good ethical practice in healthcare. This section also briefly explains the theories and principles pertinent to the practice of healthcare and assists the reader with developing skills in critical analysis. A stepped approach on how to handle an ethical dilemma is detailed. Chapter 1 deals with the doctor-patient relationship. General principles are discussed to start off with. This is then followed by topics including the changing expectations of the doctor-patient relationship, types of relationships in modern medicine, the importance of good communication, trust and reciprocity and recognising responsibilities and boundaries. Chapter 2 deals with consent and chapter 3 with adults who lack capacity. In chapter 4, which looks at children and young people, subjects like combining respect for autonomy with best interests, cultural

practices and child protection are detailed. Confidentiality, health records and contraception, abortion and birth are the subject matter for chapters 5, 6 and 7, respectively. Chapter 8 details issues in the context of assisted reproduction and considers the new dilemmas that could arise with new reproductive technologies, how assisted reproduction is regulated, access to treatment and pre-implantation genetic testing, among others. Ethical and legal issues in the context of genetics are covered in chapter 9. Topics in this chapter range from consent for genetic testing and confidentiality within families to consumer testing and controversial uses of genetic material. Caring for patients at the end of life, euthanasia and physician assisted suicide and responsibilities after a patient's death are detailed in the 3 chapters that follow. Prescribing and administering medicine is detailed in chapter 13. The challenges and dilemmas, pressures from patients and employers' conflicts of interests and pharmacogenetics are just some of the topics included in this chapter, which is followed by research and innovative treatment (chapter 14), emergency situations (chapter 15) and doctors with dual obligations (chapter 16). The following 5 chapters consider issues around providing treatment and care in detention settings, education and training, teamwork, shared care referral and obligation, public health dimensions of medical practice and reducing risk, clinical error and poor performance.

Throughout the book, ethical, legal and human rights issues are given due consideration. Practical and relevant case studies in the form of vignettes and case law together with best practice in real-world situations are included in each chapter. Although this book is voluminous (most chapters are 40 - 50 pages), it is justifiably so, as almost all ethical and legal issues that could arise in medical practice are covered. Practical guidance points are offered for the various dilemmas. While the laws are specific to the UK, their principles could be applied in any country and the legal guidance is particularly helpful in regions where such laws are nascent or do not exist at all. The handbook is an excellent resource for students and healthcare practitioners in all disciplines in health science, academics, lawyers and policy makers. It will be an invaluable investment for university libraries, and health sciences and medico-legal practices globally.

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