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The Horns of Dilemma: Life or Sovereignty?

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Abstract

Death and dying are the bitter truth that is faced by every person inevitably. Paying respect to the decision of a patient in a hospital setting is always a challenging task. In eastern countries, family plays an important role in decision making. But it always overrides the preferences and wishes of the patient and this leads to violation of ethical principles such as autonomy, informed consent and veracity. Looking a situation from different paradigms and deciding the best solution on the ground of ethical principles should be the utmost priority of the healthcare provider.

Keywords: Autonomy; Informed consent; Paternalism; Veracity; Beneficence

Scenario

A 62-year old male patient admitted with the complaint of gangrene on his right foot. The patient was from a small village, with the problem of language barrier and was resistant to seek medical help. His daughter insisted him to be admitted to the hospital once for a routine checkup. On admission, the team assessed the wound and decided to perform above knee amputation. The daughter was afraid to tell his father about the procedure as she knew that he will refuse it. The patient had firm belief that his body is given by Almighty and nobody can make any changes in it. The daughter talked to the team and signed the consent on the behalf of his father. On the next day, the patient was brought to the pre-operative area and the patient was unaware about the forthcoming medical procedure on his knee. All he could know was that he is going for some test. The surgeon insisted to tell the patient about the procedure but his daughter refused to inform his father and requested the surgeon to perform the procedure.

This scenario directs different questions that are important from the ethical point of view. Is caring for a loved one can nullify the autonomy of an individual? If life and death situation is faced by a family; should autonomy be the priority at that instance? Is hiding truth for the benefit of an individual is a correct approach? How paternalistic view and informed consent both can be justified in the above scenario? The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the scenario from different paradigms and to find justifications based on ethical principles.

Autonomy vs. Theory of Ethics of Care

In hospital setting, whenever a patient is admitted for a surgical procedure he/she is given a chance to decide his own plan of care. Before surgical procedure, the patient gets explanation regarding the procedure, its need, duration of the procedure and its after effects [1]. After the details, the patient is asked to decide whether to accept the mode of treatment or to reject the plan. In this state, patient should be free from coercion and he should be asked before proceeding to further steps. Hence patient's autonomy should be given the priority in

decision making. On the other hand, the family always thinks in all possible ways to save their loved one's life. The theory of care of ethics enforces the family to fulfill their duty. In addition, [2] stated obligation based ethics which also supports the actions which are based on rules rather than the consequences of the action. In the above-mentioned case, the daughter was following the ethics of care because she wanted to save the life whereas; we should see the scenario through patient's perspective too. Therefore, patient's autonomy should be given the priority over ethics of care.

Informed Consent vs. Paternalism

Informed consent is the primary factor to protect patient's legal rights and to maintain ethical practice in hospital. Informed consent is important in terms of three important aspects that are legal, ethical and administrative. Legally it protects from assault and unwanted procedures. Ethically it supports autonomous decision making and supports goals defined by patients. Administratively, it facilitates correct documentation that both of the parties (patient and hospital) are involved in decision making [3]. Care is considered as a reciprocal practice between a caregiver (nurse/family) and care receiver (patient). Such practice verifies that weather patient's needs are met or not. If this practice is not followed correctly and the abuse of power occurs with the intention to benefit the patient then it is known as paternalism [2]. Hence patient's needs and wishes should be given the priority by taking informed consent over paternalism.

Veracity vs. Beneficence

The principle of veracity is telling the truth and accurate information to the patient. Patient has full rights to know about his treatment plan. The consequences of not informing the patient can be detrimental to the situation. In respect to the above scenario, the patient was not willing to go for the procedure. Yet, patient's daughter tried to hide the fact and violated the principle of veracity without thinking about the detrimental consequences to the situation. However, according to Chinese medical ethics, it is alright to deceive the truth when the family decides to hide it for the benefit of the patient and by following Confucian view [4].

On the contrary, the principle of beneficence is to do good. The daughter thought to save her father's life. She didn't want to let him go in this way. To some extent, the daughter is right in thinking about her father and she wants him to be safe from all sorts of harms but again she also needs to analyze the after effects of violating the veracity. What if after the procedure the patient's go in denial phase? What if he thinks that dying peacefully is more convenient than living without a limb? Consequently, the principle of veracity overweighs the principle of beneficence in this case.

Counter Argument

By evaluating the above scenario from the daughter's perspective we can have a different picture of decision making. In Pakistani context, the family plays a major role in decision making and it is a natural phenomenon that a family shares a unique bonding [5]. In death and dying situations when one of the family members is fighting with terminally ill disease; at that time, the family has hope as well. They wait for a miracle which can twist the situation. Due to emotional attachment, family harmony and the role of beloved one in the family; the family members try every possible thing to save the life. In the given scenario, the daughter realized that the gangrene can be toxic and can even lead to death. The daughter thus worked on the ethics of care, paternalistic approach and the principle of beneficence in order to safe his father's precious life.

Justification for My Position

In the above scenario, I think my position sounds more ethically appropriate and it is in the favor of patient. The prime focus should be the need of the patient and I believe that a person can best select for himself. Family involvement is an integral part of decision making but the final decision should be in patient's hand. The family should focus on spending quality of limited time instead of aiming to prolong the lifespan [6]. This thought will achieve win-win situation that is patient will happily spend his time with his family and the family will also see their beloved one living the limited time happily.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the eastern view, the family plays an integral role in decision making of an individual suffering from any disease process whereas patient's autonomy should also be given the priority in finalizing any decision (Table 1). A person is the best decision maker of his life if he is an adult and mentally stable so, every individual should be given the chance to decide for himself. But in hospitals, a nurse can play a role of an advocator by counseling both the patient and family for the positive achievable results. As gangrene takes time to spread throughout the body so there is a time to change the mindset of an individual.

Patient-Physician-Family (Trio Approach)	Inhospitals, the trio approach should be followed. The terms and conditions should be clearly explained to everyone and then family and patient should be given the time to take the final decision.
Group Therapy	Patients should get a chance to interact with other patients so that they can get a chance to see someone who is suffering from the same disease process. They can see the problems which they can encounter later in their disease process which are faced by other patients. Furthermore, they can also see the positive effects on the life of the patients who underwent the procedure such as amputation.
Inspirational Videos	In hospitals, a room should be specified where patients in a group can be shown inspirational videos of famous people who are living happy life with some disabilities or videos can be shared regarding people who are using prosthetic devices and doing their activity of daily livings independently. This can give a sense of motivation to patients and there is a chance that they can change their decision.

Table 1: Following measures can be taken by a nurse in hospital setting to bring a positive change in a patient.

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