

Bioethics Bonanza

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Over the past couple of years, the Bioethics Consultative Committee has been active in promoting an understanding of bioethical issues within the medical profession, as well as more generally among the paramedical, and indeed the lay public. As part of this programme, a number of conferences and seminars have been organised, the first one on Informed Consent (January 1998), which was followed by one relating to Bioethics and Disability (December 1998). The latest in this series, and the more ambitious, was held on three consecutive evenings in November 1999 and dealt with three different topics, namely, Patient Rights, Reproductive Technology and Transplantation.

Patient rights

In recent times we are hearing more and more about patients' rights. The medical profession in Malta has always insisted that patients have a right to a high standard of medical care within the confines of economic realities. This we have always endeavoured to provide. What we, as a medical profession have been criticised most strongly about, is our interaction with the individual patient, and in particular, our lack of ability to provide adequate information and communication.

Dr. D. Soler, President of the College of Family Doctors spoke at length about the Patient Charter provided by the College. In it we find an explicit itemisation of those rights and legitimate expectations of our patients. This Charter also hints rather broadly at the fact that rights always involve obligations, both on the part of the doctor, as well as the patient. These and other related issues were the topics of other speakers including Dr. Pierre Mallia, who spoke about Patient Rights in General Practice, and Dr. Sandra Buttigieg on the rights of the Elderly Patient.

The multi-disciplinary nature of these seminars has always been a prominent feature. The medical point of view is balanced and extended with insights from ethicists, legal experts, as well as lay persons themselves. In an interesting talk by Dr. Ruth Farrugia, LL.D., the legal aspects of child and parents were expanded and clarified. But perhaps the most stringent of all critics was Ms. Cecilia Xuereb, a member of the Bioethics Committee, who spoke about the lay perspective of patient rights. She warned about the danger of depersonalisation and dehumanisation of medical services that could result when health care was determined solely by a market economy. She added also that while the family doctor is still looked upon with respect by most people, there are still big gaps in communication between doctor and patient. Lack of respect towards a patient can also manifest itself as refusal to disclose to patients, the real nature of their condition, inability to organise time so as to avoid long waiting lists (in public as well as in private practice), long waiting time for an appointment, or merely ignoring the need to introduce oneself to a patient before examining them.

Reproductive technology

As with the previous seminar, this one was also multi-disciplinary and the speakers included Dr. Lino German and Fr. Dr. E. Agius, who spoke on ethical issues. Dr. Lorraine Schembri Orland, LL.D., spoke on Legal Aspects and Professor H. ten Have, from the Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, emphasised European aspects.

Perhaps in no other area of bioethics is there so much controversy and division between the different points of view. The Bioethics Consultative Committee has prepared a document on this topic, after suitable consultation with the medical profession, and this was presented at the meeting. However, at committee level we have had problems reaching consensus about the appropriateness of certain technologies. While, on the other hand, there are those who are anxious to catch up with developments in Europe, there are others who see in this area, a real challenge to family life as we have known it, and therefore consider these technologies unacceptable. In the words of the Minister for Health, the Hon. Dr. Louis Deguara, who opened the meeting, "The Reproductive Technology document touches upon third party sperm donation and the storage of gametes. It is not an agenda which any government can adopt without going through the channels of public fora and the important institutions representing the main religious beliefs and cultures of the Maltese people".

Transplantation

In contrast to the previous topic, this one is not controversial *per se*. It does, however, entail a number of issues, which require careful medical, ethical as well as legal consideration. In this seminar, Rev. Prof. George Grima spoke on the philosophical and ethical issues. Dr. Emanuel Farrugia dealt with ethical issues as faced by the physician member of the transplant team. Dr. Mary Anne Lauri provided some very interesting statistical information relating to the public acceptance of the transplant procedure and its willingness to participate as potential donors, or else when faced with a decision whether to allow donation from a relative who had been the victim of a tragic death.

The Bioethics Consultative Committee has also been working on a document on this topic and this was also presented at the meeting. It is also currently the topic of a document being prepared by the Bioethics Committee of the Council of Europe which will be released sometime next year.

Some of the major issues involved in this area include the need to ensure that there is equity and transparency in the distribution of organs; that there is confidentiality and there is no risk of commercialisation. These are

only some of the issues that were discussed at the seminar and in the document.

It is obviously impossible to give a detailed summary of a three-day seminar in the space of a couple of pages. As in previous years, the proceedings of these seminars will be published in the coming weeks. Further details about the Bioethics Consultative Committee may be obtained from the Committee's website, which may be found at *www.synapse.net.mt/bioethics*.

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