

Developing a Medical Ethics Guideline in a New Private Hospital

Roland Fasol^{1*}, Daria Ler², Esmir Kavazović¹, Azur Tulumović³, and Rasim Jusufović³

¹Medical University of Vienna International, Bosnia And Herzegovina

²ASA Institute Sarajevo, Bosnia And Herzegovina

³ASA Bolnica Sarajevo, Bosnia And Herzegovina

***Corresponding Author:** Roland Fasol, Medical University of Vienna International, & ASA Bolnica Sarajevo Bulevar Mese Selimovica 16 Sarajevo 71000 Bosnia and Herzegovina, E-mail: roland.fasol@meduniwien.ac.at

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Abstract

In the process of establishing and starting a new private general hospital, integrating a comprehensive medical ethics program is of paramount importance. This short report aims to develop such a program by engaging healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and medical students, in discussions on various ethical dilemmas commonly faced in a healthcare setting. Following an ethics conference, participants analyzed ten specific ethical scenarios relevant to hospital operations. The insights obtained provided a foundational understanding of the ethical challenges and informed the creation of a targeted ethics program. The implementation of this program is expected to enhance ethical decision-making and improve patient care for this new private general hospital in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: Medical Ethics; Guidelines; Hospital; Patient-Centered Care

Introduction

The evolving landscape of healthcare continually presents new ethical challenges. As a new hospital aims to establish itself, one of its critical objectives should be the development of a robust medical ethics program. The significance of such programs cannot be overstated, as they foster a culture of ethical consciousness and empower healthcare professionals to navigate complex moral issues. Existing literature underscores the effectiveness of structured ethics programs in enhancing clinical decision making, mitigating conflicts, and promoting patient-centered care [1,2].

Specific to the context of a new hospital, implementing a medical ethics program early on is crucial for several reasons. First, a new hospital faces the unique challenge of establishing its reputation and gaining trust within the community it serves. An unwavering commitment to high ethical standards can significantly expedite this trust-building process. Second, new hospitals often experience a period of organizational flux as systems and protocols are being established. Having a clear and well-developed ethics program provides a stable framework that guides staff behaviour and decision-making during this formative period. Third, new hospitals are likely to attract professionals from diverse backgrounds, each bringing varied experiences and perspectives on ethical issues. A consistent ethics program helps harmonize these different viewpoints, creating a cohesive culture focused on ethical excellence.

Ethical dilemmas in healthcare settings often revolve around patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, and resource allocation. According to Beauchamp and Childress [3], the four core principles of biomedical ethics - autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice - serve as the framework for addressing these issues. Studies have shown that well-designed ethics programs that include case studies, ethical rounds, and seminars significantly improve healthcare workers' ability to handle ethical dilemmas [4]. Furthermore, involving a multidisciplinary team in the creation and implementation of these programs is crucial for their success [5].

Materials and Methods

We hosted a comprehensive conference, attended by nearly 100 stakeholders comprising doctors, nurses, and medical students from a wide range of specialties. The central aim of this gathering was to examine and thoroughly analyze ten real-world ethical dilemmas frequently faced in our hospital settings. Great care was taken to ensure that these scenarios were authentic and reflective of the actual experiences encountered by our medical staff.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its multicultural society and a recent history of conflict rooted in religious and ethnic differences, provided a unique backdrop for our discussions. This contextual understanding was crucial, as it emphasized the complex ethical landscape within which our healthcare professionals operate.

The conference adopted a structured discussion format designed to foster open dialogue and encourage critical thinking among participants. By creating an environment conducive to candid conversations, we aimed to collaboratively address and navigate the complex ethical challenges inherent in medical practice.

Selection Process of Ethical Dilemmas

The process of selecting the ten ethical dilemmas was rigorously structured to ensure relevance and authenticity. Initially, a preliminary survey was conducted among the conference attendees and a broader sample of hospital staff to identify common ethical challenges they encounter in their daily practice. Over 50 scenarios were collected through this survey.

A smaller working group comprising experienced ethics committee members, senior healthcare providers, and academic experts was then formed to review and analyze the collected scenarios. The review process was guided by specific criteria, such as:

- 1. Frequency of Occurrence:** Preference was given to dilemmas that staff frequently face.
- 2. Complexity and Urgency:** Scenarios that posed significant ethical challenges and required timely resolutions were prioritized.

3. Diversity of Issues: Efforts were made to cover a broad spectrum of ethical concerns across different medical specialties and settings.

4. Impact on Patient Care: The potential impact of the ethical dilemma on patient outcomes and care quality was a critical factor.

5. Cultural Relevance: Considering Bosnia and Herzegovina's multicultural society, scenarios that illustrated the intersection of ethical issues with cultural and societal nuances were specially included.

Final Selection and Validation

After thorough analysis, 15 scenarios were short-listed based on the above criteria. These scenarios were then subjected to further validation through collaborative workshops where a diverse group of healthcare professionals discussed and voted on the most critical dilemmas. The final selection of ten ethical dilemmas emerged from these workshops, ensuring that each scenario was representative of the broader ethical landscape in our hospital settings. Lastly, the selected scenarios were reviewed for clarity and context before being introduced to the conference for facilitated discussions. This multi-stage selection process ensured a robust and transparent examination of critical ethical dilemmas faced by healthcare providers.

Ethical Scenarios Discussed

1. Patient Autonomy vs. Medical Advice

This scenario explored the tension between a patient's right to make their own healthcare decisions and the medical advice given by healthcare professionals. Discussions focused on how to respect patient autonomy while ensuring the best medical outcomes.

2. Informed Consent and Disclosure

Participants examined the ethical necessity of informed consent, delving into the nuances of how much information should be disclosed to patients to help them make truly informed decisions about their care.

3. End-of-Life Decisions

This scenario addressed the emotionally and morally charged decisions surrounding end-of-life care, including do-not-resuscitate (DNR) orders and palliative sedation. The discussion emphasized compassion and respect for the wishes of patients and their families.

4. Allocation of Scarce Resources

The ethical dilemmas associated with allocating limited medical resources, such as organ transplants or critical care beds, were discussed. The focus was on equitable distribution and the principles that should guide such tough decisions.

5. Confidentiality and Patient Privacy

This scenario revolved around maintaining patient confidentiality in an era of electronic health records and widespread data sharing. Participants discussed strategies to protect patient privacy while facilitating necessary communication among care providers.

6. Professional Boundaries in Patient Relationships

Discussions centered on the importance of maintaining professional boundaries to ensure that patient relationships remain ethical and therapeutic. Case studies highlighted scenarios where these boundaries could be tested.

7. Cultural Sensitivity in Treatment Plans

This scenario underscored the importance of cultural competence in developing treatment plans, exploring how cultural differences can impact patient care and the ethical imperative to respect these differences.

8. Handling Medical Errors

The ethical aspects of acknowledging, reporting, and rectifying medical errors were examined. The focus was on fostering an environment where healthcare providers can learn from mistakes without fear of punitive repercussions.

9. Impact of Financial Incentives

The discussion addressed the ethical concerns surrounding financial incentives in healthcare, such as the influence of pharmaceutical marketing on prescribing prac-

tices. The goal was to identify strategies to mitigate potential conflicts of interest.

10. Inter-professional Conflicts

The scenario explored conflicts that can arise between different healthcare professionals, including differences in opinions about patient care. Participants discussed strategies for effective communication and conflict resolution.

Each scenario was introduced with comprehensive context and background information, providing a foundation for a detailed, moderated discussion. These discussions captured diverse perspectives from participants, highlighting various proposed solutions and fostering a deeper understanding of each ethical dilemma.

Summary of Discussions

1. Patient Autonomy vs. Medical Advice: A key takeaway was the importance of respecting patient autonomy while ensuring patients are provided with sufficient information to make well-informed decisions. This balance is crucial for fostering trust and empowering individuals in their healthcare journeys.

2. Informed Consent and Disclosure: Attendees highlighted the necessity for clear and effective communication strategies to ensure patients understand all aspects of their treatment options. This includes explaining potential risks, benefits, and alternatives to facilitate truly informed consent.

3. End-of-Life Decisions: The conversation underscored the significance of advance directives and the need for ethics consultations to support patients and families making challenging end-of-life decisions. Such measures help align medical interventions with patients' values and wishes.

4. Allocation of Scarce Resources: The discussion brought attention to the principles of equity and fairness in the allocation of limited healthcare resources. Ensuring that resource distribution is just and unbiased was identified as a foundational ethical imperative.

5. Confidentiality and Patient Privacy: Participants unanimously agreed that maintaining patient confidentiality is essential, even in the face of technological advancements that may complicate data security. Robust mechanisms to safeguard privacy were deemed non-negotiable.

6. Professional Boundaries in Patient Relationships: To maintain the integrity of patient-provider relationships, the implementation of clear guidelines and regular training on professional boundaries was recommended. Such measures are vital for preventing conflicts of interest and maintaining trust.

7. Cultural Sensitivity in Treatment Plans: The inclusion of cultural competence training for healthcare staff was recommended to promote sensitivity and respect for diverse cultural and religious backgrounds in treatment plans. This approach enhances patient care and supports better health outcomes.

8. Handling Medical Errors: Participants advocated for a culture of transparency and a non-punitive approach to error reporting. This fosters an environment where medical professionals can learn from mistakes and improve patient safety without fear of retribution.

9. Impact of Financial Incentives: The potential for conflicts of interest arising from financial incentives was acknowledged. There was a collective call for the creation and enforcement of transparent policies to mitigate any adverse impact on patient care.

10. Inter-Professional Conflicts: Effective conflict resolution strategies and the crucial role of ethics committees were emphasized as essential for managing inter-professional conflicts. Collaborative approaches are key to fostering a healthy and productive work environment in healthcare settings.

Discussion

Addressing Ethical Challenges in Healthcare: Our findings highlight a unanimous recognition of the need for a structured ethical framework in healthcare settings, emphasizing that the complexities inherent in clinical deci-

sion-making require a systematic approach. The diversity of perspectives garnered during our discussions underscores the importance of assembling multidisciplinary teams for ethical deliberations. Previous studies have shown that incorporating varied expertise not only enriches the dialogue but also leads to more sustainable and acceptable solutions to ethical dilemmas [6]. The ethical scenarios identified in our discussions resonate closely with those frequently encountered in academic and clinical environments, reinforcing the urgent need for education and policy formulation that aligns with these real-world challenges.

Integrating Insights into Practice: The insights gathered from our conference will serve as a foundational pillar for the advancement of our hospital's medical ethics program. This program aims to be holistic in its approach, incorporating ethics consultations that allow for real-time resolution of dilemmas, regular training sessions that raise awareness and knowledge of ethical principles, and the establishment of a dedicated ethics committee tasked with sustaining ethical oversight. Building on the frameworks proposed by DuVal [4] and Machin [5], we also plan to implement interdisciplinary rounds and case discussions that will encourage collaborative learning and cross-disciplinary dialogue. Such initiatives are not only vital for ethical competence but also promote a culture of ethical reflection among healthcare professionals, thereby fostering better patient care and enhancing professional integrity.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study: A significant strength of this study lies in its inclusive methodology, which allowed for the collection of a wide range of viewpoints from various healthcare professionals. This diversity is crucial, as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical landscape within our institution. However, we recognize certain limitations inherent in the study. The relatively short period of operation of our new hospital may limit the generalizability of our findings, and potential biases in the discussion setting could have influenced participant responses. To enhance the validity of our research, future studies should aim to include a broader participant base and explore additional data collection methods, such as quantitative surveys and follow-up interviews, that could further elucidate the complexities of medical ethics in contemporary healthcare environments.

Conclusion

The creation of a medical ethics program in a new hospital setting necessitates detailed planning and active stakeholder engagement. Our ethics conference has not only identified crucial ethical dilemmas but has also laid the groundwork for implementing a robust and values-driven framework. By prioritizing the integration of ethical considerations into daily practice, we can significantly enhance both patient care outcomes and professional standards within our institution. Moving forward, we are committed to fostering an environment where ethical deliberation is valued and where healthcare professionals are empowered to navigate the intricacies of moral challenges in their practice.

Recommendations for Creating Ethical Frameworks in Hospitals

Establishing a dedicated Ethics Committee

Formation: Create a multidisciplinary ethics committee comprising representatives from various departments including physicians, nurses, legal advisors, social workers, and patient advocates.

Responsibilities: Assign the committee to review complex cases, develop hospital-wide ethical guidelines, and provide counsel on ethical issues.

Meeting Frequency: Schedule regular meetings to discuss ongoing and emerging ethical issues and establish protocols for emergency consultations.

Comprehensive Ethics Training and Education

Orientation Programs: Include mandatory ethics training in the orientation process for all new hires.

Continuing Education: Offer ongoing workshops, seminars, and case study discussions to keep staff informed about ethical best practices.

Simulation Exercises: Implement role-playing and simulation exercises to help staff practice handling ethical dilemmas in a controlled environment.

Transparent Policy Development

Informed Consent: Develop clear policies around the process of informed consent, ensuring they are easily understood and accessible to all staff members.

Error Reporting: Create non-punitive error reporting mechanisms that encourage transparency and continuous improvement.

Confidentiality Standards: Update and enforce robust confidentiality policies to adapt to technological advancements and data-sharing practices.

Cultural Competence Training

Diverse Patient Care: Educate healthcare professionals on the sociocultural factors that influence patient care, ensuring inclusion and respect for cultural differences.

Tailored Communication: Train staff to effectively communicate with patients from various cultural backgrounds and provide culturally sensitive care.

Resource Allocation Protocols

Equitable Distribution: Develop clear guidelines for the fair allocation of scarce resources, ensuring all decisions are ethically sound and transparent.

Ethical Framework: Align resource allocation policies with ethical principles such as justice and equity, considering factors like patient need and treatment potential.

Creating a Supportive Environment

Open Dialogue: Establish an environment that promotes candid discussions about ethical concerns without fear of retribution.

Ethics Liaisons: Designate ethics liaisons within each department to serve as points of contact for ethical issues and facilitate communication with the ethics committee.

Handling Professional Boundaries

Clear Guidelines: Develop and disseminate clear

policies on maintaining professional boundaries between healthcare providers and patients.

Regular Review: Conduct periodic reviews and discussions on boundary-related issues to reinforce the importance of ethics in patient relationships.

Financial Incentives Management

Conflict of Interest Policies: Create transparent policies to manage and mitigate conflicts of interest arising from financial incentives.

Continual Monitoring: Establish an oversight mechanism to regularly monitor practices related to financial incentives and address any ethical concerns promptly.

Facilitating Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution

Interprofessional Training: Offer training programs focused on interprofessional collaboration and conflict resolution strategies.

Mediation Services: Provide mediation services or intervention protocols to resolve conflicts effectively and maintain a cohesive working environment.

Ethical Evaluation and Assessment

Continuous Improvement: Regularly assess the effectiveness of the ethical framework and make necessary adjustments based on feedback and evolving ethical standards.

Performance Metrics: Develop and track metrics that evaluate the ethical dimensions of patient care and staff satisfaction.

By implementing these specific recommendations, hospitals can create robust ethical frameworks that support both healthcare providers and patients in navigating complex moral landscapes. Establishing comprehensive policies, fostering a culture of continuous ethical education, and promoting open dialogue around ethical issues will help new hospitals build a solid foundation of trust and integrity within their communities.

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