

COMMENTARY

Biomedical Ethics and its Need

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ABSTRACT:

The history of medical ethics dates back to the time of Hippocrates. The involvement of philosophers, anthropologists, religious scholars and lawyers in the field of ethics gave birth to a new subject 'Bioethics.' After the human experimentations of World War II, other inhuman activities were carried on in which humans were merely used as guinea pigs. Therefore 'Bioethics' was evolved. The medical professionals should be informed about the problems and issues which are emerging. That is the reason why Biomedical ethics should be discussed with the students of health profession right from the beginning of their medical carrier. This will bring a change in the future health professionals. The doctors are required to act morally in addition to be skilled in their subject. If we want our students to be morally and ethically reflective upon the present day issues then it is a must to teach them and introduce them with the subject of Bioethics.

Keywords: Bioethics, Moral, Ethical, Experimentation, Rights, Health professionals

INTRODUCTION:

The history of medical ethics dates back to the time of Hippocrates. From the time of Hippocrates till the mid of 20th century the field of ethics was dealt by the doctors.¹ The involvement of philosophers, anthropologists, religious scholars and lawyers in the field of ethics gave birth to a new subject "Bioethics."^{1,2} The subject evolved in U.S.A. in 1970's. The term Bioethics was first coined by an American biochemist, Van Rensselaer Potter.³ The subject of Bioethics revolves around the study of moral conduct in the field of medicine.

The Nazis carried out fatal and lethal experimentations in World War II. Twenty doctors were involved in those deadly experimentations which were carried on human subjects in Germany. After the World War II, Nuremberg trials were held (1945-1946) and that lead to the evolvement of Nuremberg code or principles. The principles signify that the humans should not be involved in any scientific experiments without prior permission or informed consent. The violation of human dignity and self respect created extensive moral outrage.⁴ This was followed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The declaration stipulates that all human beings must be treated equally and should be free to exercise their rights.⁵

These incidents have major contribution in the evolvement of Biomedical ethics. After the human experimentations of World War II, other inhuman activities were carried on in which humans were merely used as guinea pigs. The UNIT 731 study was done in China in which the humans were vivisected and infected with lethal infections to see and observe the effects of the infected germs on the human body. Similar behavior was witnessed in the Tuskegee syphilis study in which the Afro-Americans were enrolled in the study. In the experimental studies the victims believed that the doctors

were treating them but they had no idea that the doctors were not giving them medications. The cruelty and brutality lead to dehumanization and deaths of vulnerable and helpless individuals.⁶ In the year 1966, a physician Henry K Beecher published an article which disclosed the misuse of humans by the American physicians. This article played an important role in widely spreading the news of mistreatment of human subjects.⁷ Bioethics then evolved as a result of unethical practices. We can say that Bioethics is a systemic study of moral conduct. The subject established the awareness that ethical standards should be followed while handling humans and informed consent is an important element. All the humans which are part of any experimentation or treatment should know what is going to be done to their bodies and how they are going to be used. The queries which are arising in the new era are also the part of this subject. Questions about what life and death are, how and when a person can be declared as dead, the issues related to abortions and contraception etc have become the part of Bioethics. Other than the discussed topics, other wide range social matters like women rights, occupational health, population control, issues of third world countries are also discussed. Issues related to transplantation, genetic engineering, reproductive techniques and cloning are also dealt in the field of contemporary Bioethics.⁸ The changes which are occurring in the modern era have to be discussed and solved. The medical professionals should be informed about the problems and issues which are emerging. That is the reason why Bioethics should be discussed with the upcoming future doctors right from the very beginning of their medical career. According to Hippocrates, "the physician must also add the love of humanity."⁹ The doctors are required to act morally other than to be professionally skilled in their field. These days Bioethics is considered to be one of the important components of medical education worldwide. U.S.A. was the pioneer in introducing the subject to the medical students. By the year 1994, Bioethics was part of medical curriculum in all the medical colleges of America.¹⁰ Musick in his article mentioned that ethics is an essential subject which needs to be taught to the medical students.¹¹ That is the reason why Bioethics should be included in the curriculum both at the under and post graduate levels. PMDC stipulates that ethics should be included in the curriculum.¹² In spite of this requirement, there are few



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colleges of Pakistan which have inculcated Bioethics in the curriculum.¹³ A study conducted in Karachi showed that Bioethics taught during the teaching period of medical schools is unsatisfactory.¹¹ In Pakistan, Aga Khan University was the very first institute to include the subject of Bioethics informally in the curriculum in 1980's.¹⁴ In 2004, Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture (CBEC) was established. The centre started a Post graduate Diploma course in Bioethics from 2006 onwards. In 2010, Masters Program was also started there. The alumni of CBEC had later contributed in spreading the knowledge which they had gained.¹⁵ They had established ethical review committee (ERC) in their institutes as well as undergraduate and post graduate training.¹⁶ At Bahria University Medical and Dental College, Ethical Review Committee was established in 2010 and Biomedical ethics was introduced to the medical students in 2015.

Bioethics subject should be incorporated in the medical curriculum as it is a need of the day. This incorporation should be done through horizontal as well as vertical integration so that the subject gets proper importance and integration.¹⁷ The purpose of teaching Bioethics is to stimulate the young minds to the changing times and to introduce them with the new issues which are arising. After getting training in the Bioethics, the medical students would be able to identify the ethical issues and can come up with moral reasoning of the given scenario. Motivation and inspiration are essential factors for Bioethics teaching and imparting training to prepare ethical health professionals. A well constructed Bioethics curriculum is needed as a key component. One of the goals of teaching should be to make a curriculum that should produce interest and enthusiasm in the students.¹⁸ Students keenness can be generated by adding case scenarios and topic related videos and role plays. The discussion generated by the videos and the case scenarios are very beneficial in understanding the subject. Short groups are ideal so all the students can participate actively. In place of lectures, Problem Based learning strategy can play an ideal role in imparting the knowledge of Bioethics and also to generate discussion among the members. Students after taking training, learn to differentiate between the right and wrong in the given situation.¹⁹

The advancements in technology will bring more and more queries with the passage of time. The issues need to be addressed. Policies and plans have to be designed in order to make a proper setup to ethically reflect upon such problems. The policies should be updated and improved on regular basis.

The institute of Pakistan Medical and Dental Council should make the subject of Bioethics mandatory in all the medical colleges of the country. This step would help the authorities to realize the importance of teaching the new subject. The doctors after getting degree from the medical college will not only be skilled in their professional tasks, but will also be able to think critically and understand the issues around and can come up with rational reasoning.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude Bioethics, a comparatively new subject in Pakistan is need of the day. If we want our students to be morally and ethically reflective upon the present day issues then it is a must to teach them and introduce them with the subject of Bioethics. This will benefit the patients and fellow colleagues. To attain this goal, we need to have faculty trained in the subject of Bioethics. The administration of the colleges and the universities should take initiative to include the subject in the curriculum and to motivate the staff members to get training in the subject.

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