

Medical Ethics Activities and Plans in Iran at a Glance

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ABSTRACT

The new biomedical sciences and technologies have been associated with increasing ethical debates worldwide in particular in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Advances in genetic engineering, stem cell research, cloning and organ transplantation are some of the medical issues that have raised ethical concerns. Considering ever-increasing renewed interest in medical ethics in the country, great strides have been made in this field in recent decades.

In this article, our aim is to present a brief review of current medical ethics activities including establishment of Medical Ethics Research Committees, Medical Ethics Research Center, compiling a strategic plan for medical ethics activities, and implementation of the general and specific National Codes of ethics in Biomedical Research. Reforming medical ethics education in medical universities is also stated. Some future plans are also pointed out.

Key words: Bioethics; Ethics committee; Ethics education; Iran; Medical ethics; Strategic plan

INTRODUCTION

Medical ethics is the branch of ethics that deals with moral issues in medical practice.¹ Physicians have always been confronted with ethical issues, and having to make difficult decisions is part of their responsibility. Ethics is and always has been an essential component of medical practice.¹

However advances in modern medicine over the past few decades have given rise to situations that the doctors must deal with moral issues in their medical practice. Certainly, clinicians and ethicists have to perpetually evaluate new medical technologies to

ensure that they are used in morally appropriate ways. The question facing the ethicists is whether medical ethics can keep up with the rapid progress of technology. The ethical issues surrounding medical advances and new technologies have not been fully resolved in the world.

As medical ethics can and does change over time, in response to developments in medical science and technology as well as in societal values, it modifies from one country to another depending on these same factors.¹ Iranian Muslim physicians had firmly believed, even since medieval, that ethics education must be an integral part of the medical education curriculum. However, the increased recognition of new ethical queries and resurgence of ethics in relation to health care has also contributed to an emphasis on ethics by medical and religious professions in Iran in recent decades.

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MEDICAL ETHICS ACTIVITIES

A review of activities in recent decades has been published in the English and Persian journals in 2005.^{2,3}

Establishment of Medical Ethics Research Center by Ministry of Health and Medical education (MOHME) in 1993, formation of Medical Ethics Research Committees at National level (1997), formation of Medical Ethics Research Committees at University level for monitoring research, implementation of the National Code for ethics in Biomedical Research all over the country, and translating and authoring books on medical ethics and ethics in research have been the early activities in our country. "Medical Ethics with a Brief Overview of Medical History" (1991) is one of the reference books for medical students in Iran which was published by MOHME in collaboration with the faculties of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences.⁴

The First International Conference on Medical Ethics (Tehran, 1993), seminars and short-courses on medical ethics for physicians, nurses and pharmacists, weekly workshops on research ethics for medical researchers in different regions of the country are being conducted.

The National Codes of Ethics for biomedical research (26 codes) was prepared by MOHME in 2000.^{2,5} These codes are in accordance with the international declarations such as Helsinki Declaration and have been customized according to Islamic codes and Iranian cultural issues.

Compilation of a strategic plan for medical ethics activities started in 2002 by the Research and Technology Deputy of MOHME. A report of the Medical Ethics Strategic Planning is published in Developing World Bioethics Journal.⁶ Following the implementation of nationwide strategic planning in medical ethics, considerable plans and activities are being carried out by MOHME. Some important activities consist of: approval of the "Medical Ethics and Medical History Research Center" in the Tehran University of Medical Sciences; maintaining and strengthening nationwide bioethics network in collaboration with religious scholars, physicians, philosophers, legal experts, sociologists, and

intellectuals; establishment of National Medical Ethics Information Center and Library

(<http://www.mehr.tums.ac.ir> or <http://www.mehr.hbi.ir>).

Consequently, the Specific National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research were compiled in 2005(7-13). The primary draft has been reviewed by some law, ethics, medical and religious experts. The guidelines contain "Ethical Guidelines for Clinical Trials", "Ethical Guidelines for Research on Vulnerable Groups", "Ethical Guidelines for Genetic Research", "Ethical Guidelines for Gamete and Embryo research", "Ethical Guidelines for Transplantation Research", and "Ethical Guidelines for Research on Animals". The Guidelines have been ratified and forwarded to the universities and research centres in spring 2006.

Legislation

Medical ethics is closely related to law. In most countries there are laws that specify how physicians are requested to deal with ethical issues in patient care and research. In addition, the medical licensing and regulatory officials in each country can and do penalize physicians for ethical violations.¹ But ethics and law are not identical. Ethics prescribes higher standards of behavior than does the law. Moreover, laws differ significantly from one country to another while ethics is applicable across national boundaries.¹ In order to observe ethics in practice, sometimes legislation is necessary. Thanks to positive view points of scholars (fatwa) about bioethical issues such as organ transplantation, abortion, genetics, and stem cell research in Iran, some of them have been incorporated into law by the parliament in the recent years.^{2,3}

In 1998, the consensus of physicians and religious leaders in Iran paved the way for advancement and rapid progress for nationwide organ transplantation program.^{14,15} In this regard, the parliament approved the Act of Organ Transplantation and Brain Death in April 2000.^{14,16} The law related to the gift of organ donation, that it is assisted by charity organizations, was approved by the government of Iran in 1997.¹⁵ Considering this background, Iran has established one of the most successful programs of renal transplantation in the region.^{14, 17, 18} Organ

Medical Ethics Activities and Plans in Iran

transplantation and its medical, ethical, legal and religious aspects has been reviewed in a comprehensive book published in Farsi.¹⁹

In the field of assisted reproduction, Iranian parliament approved a law "Embryo Donation to Infertile Spouses Act" in 2003.^{3,20} By virtue of this law, the donation of embryo is permitted under certain conditions.

The parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran ratified also the Act of Therapeutic Abortion on 21 June 2005.²¹ Under the new law, a pregnancy can be terminated within the first four months of pregnancy if the fetus is mentally or physically handicapped, or when the mother's life is likely to be in danger. According to the act, the consent of the woman would be sufficient to carry out the abortion after the confirmation of abortion indication by three specialists.

Medical Ethics Education

Tehran University of Medical Sciences has launched a reform in medical ethics course for undergraduate medical students in current academic year (2006-7). Medical Ethics Course, before reform, consisted of two units lectures for fifth year students (clinical year). By collaboration between Medical Ethics and History Research Center and Educational Development Office of faculty of medicine, an educational development project has been proposed. This program designed to reinforce the overall goals of medical education that is training of good doctors who will enhance and promote the health and medical welfare of Iranians in merited way and with respect to their dignity and rights. Thus they should be able to recognize and analyze current ethical issues arisen in health system services and be able to make ethical decision in a properly way. In other words, the purpose of this course is to teach the skills necessary for the student to identify, analyze and resolve ethical problems in patient care situations, and choose among the options that can be done and those that ought to be done, for a given patient in a given clinical setting.

Course objectives consist of: enabling students to recognize and accept their professional commitments, enabling students to understand ethical and human

issues of medical practice, enhancing students' ethical awareness, giving students necessary knowledge and skills for ethical decision making properly with respect to the law, enabling students to use this knowledge and skills in their decision making. Principles of medical ethics (ethical theories and principles of bioethics); professionalism; main medical ethics issues (informed consent, physician-patient relationship, confidentiality, truth telling, research ethics, end of life issues, resource allocation, maternal-fetal conflict, medical errors, mistakes conflict of interest, physician relationship with other members of health care team, ethics in medical education, and competency and surrogate decision making) are the course outlines.

Educational strategies of problem-based, student centered, integrated would be used. A book on the topic of case-based Approach (2 volumes) was published in 2004⁵. A case-based approach education for teaching medical ethics was also introduced recently. Currently, lack of assigned faculties in medical ethics is a main challenge to this program.

Medical ethics education has been enhanced by establishment of MPH course (with a medical ethics focus) during last 3 years. Likewise, MS course in bioethics will be founded in Tehran University of Medical Sciences (as a joint work with Tehran University) in the near future. Some outlines of MS course in bioethics consist of medical law, medical jurisprudence, ethical theories, professionalism, and history of Islamic medical ethics, principles of medical ethics, research ethics, ethics in health care system, and religious ethics. Another future plan of MOHME is the institution of doctoral course (PhD) in bioethics.

Iran-Britain Collaborative Seminar on Medical ethics (Tehran, History of Medicine Museum of TUMS, (15-17 Sep.2006) was one step which has been taken in order to strengthen educational links in this field with other countries.

In recent years, we have attempted to publish a professional journal in the field of medical ethics and medical history. Consequently, some issues have been published as supplements in other journals (Iranian Journal of Diabetes and Lipid Disorders (IJDL), Journal of Babol University of Medical Sciences, and Daru journal).

FUTURE PLANS

Organizing medical ethics groups in medical universities; designing and establishing educational workshops at different levels; attempts to founding a specific academic course as bioethics PhD; and systematic education of national and international codes of bioethics at the level of medical professions, students, and general public are the main plans in the field of education. Strengthening Research Ethics Committees in universities and research centers and widening their responsibilities; and renewing the codes of ethics in medical research are important objectives in the field of research.

In the field of providing healthcare system, we have to pursue strengthening Ethics Committees in the hospitals and more strict supervision for observance of patient's rights of observance. Strengthening communications with regional and international organizations, empowerment of national medical ethics database and advancement of its applicability for all those interested will be other goals.

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