Ethics, Equality and Justice in Medical Practice and Society

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Ethics is a comprehensive term, which is used in regard to moral values and conditions that are prevalent and acceptable in a community. On the other hand, values that are approved and guidelines that are willingly accepted by members of a community or profession are called Code of Ethical Conduct. The best example of this is the famous Hippocratic Oath. Its main objective was the relationship between physician and patient and physician and physician. Later on, the scope of moral and ethical values were extended and were no longer limited to the medical profession, especially after the writing of the Nuremberg Code. Respect for human dignity, freedom and autonomy were the main subjects of discussion for developing ethical guidelines and principles.
In the last fifty to sixty years, we have witnessed extraordinary advances and developments in the field of medicine, from artificial insemination to surrogate motherhood, euthanasia, assisted suicide, terminal care and so on. Today, dialysis is replaced by transplantation and it is the physician who decides which patient should receive dialysis and which patient should have transplantation. More importantly is the decision on which patient should be given the priority.

In all these situations, following the rules and principles of medical ethics, equality and justice is mandatory. That is why today more than any other time in providing medical care, we need laws and applications of the medical ethics rules and guidelines. Devising medical ethics rules and principles in a community or in an institution are not the sole realm of a particular group, party or a special entity. Instead, representations from different fields in life, including representatives of “common people” should participate because all the rules – religious, social, ethical, medical –
should be studied by the experts in that field and then the rules and guidelines should be devised.

Dr. Paula Kokkonan, former Director General of Finland’s forensic medicine (at the World Medical Association – WMA meeting) said: “physicians are representatives of the only profession who have the authority in issuing the certificate of life and the certificate of death to humans”. For this reason, in developed countries, physicians’ activities must be monitored. It is a well-known fact that rules often follow the incidents. It behooves us that we learn from incidents and their outcomes. Therefore, for the benefit of the community and prevention of human right abuse, rules should be established.

Health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) is a complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, not merely absence of disease. Today, medicine is very complicated. Offering just and skilled medical assistance is only possible with the consorted effort of physicians’ activities, today has
reached the stage that in spite of the advances in medical science and technology, patients are choosing their own method of treatment. The patient has the right to opine in selecting their type of treatment. No longer are patients treated as objects. Today they are treated as personalities. In most of the countries of the world, today, physician associations are formed, and those associations have important rules in implementing the regulations of medical practice.

Even, members of these medical associations are eager to serve fellow human beings to the best of their knowledge and ability – not only locally or nationally, but different associations join together to help humanity globally.

WMA was established on September 18, 1947 in Paris, France, and this day was also named “Medical Ethics Day” so that physicians and society should be aware of the professional, as well as ethical responsibilities of the medical profession. Today, 86 medical associations from different
countries – the U.S. to Ethiopia to the Islands of Fiji – are members of the WMA. This association represents 8 million doctors and all are in the service of the human being’s well-being throughout the world.

On the other hand, WMA will not allow the issues of medical ethics principles and rules be left to the decision-making and guidance of lawyers, politicians, philosophers, ethicists or any other group which knows nothing about medicine and the physician-patient relationship.

At the WMA general assembly meeting in her farewell speech to the assembly, spoke about global solidarity and interdependence of all the world and justice, equality and human rights for all. She also presented to the World Medical Assembly, the U.N’s report of human advances and accomplishments in which the yearly expenses of all the countries and continents in different respects were shown. Some examples are as follows:
1. The total expense for basic education in the developing countries in one year was 6 billion dollars. In contrast, the expanse for providing means for beautification and cosmetics only in the U.S., was 8 billion dollars per year.

2. The expense for providing and securing drinking water and environmental health in the developing countries was 9 billion dollars per year. Again, in contrast, the yearly expense for eating ice cream per year was 11 billion dollars; expense for cigarettes was 50 billion dollars; expense for alcohol consumption was 150 billion dollars – only in Europe! Narcotics expense throughout the world was 400 billion dollars per year, and military expense was 780 billion dollar per year.

The president of WMA asked the members: Of all these expenses, as a human being, morally and ethically, do we have the right to choose on what we should spend more. What is quoted above, is a good example of the biggest injustice in
the world. She said that it is very unfortunate that this is not all. There are other conditions and situations which demonstrate today’s scope of injustice in this world. As an example, Dr. E. Wilson, President of the Institute for Investigation of Cardiac Disorders and Stroke, of Canada, said in his speech at the World Congress on Tobacco and Health: For simplicity and better explanation of the following matters, if we reduce the present population of the world (which is 7 billion) for instance, to 100 people, and leave all the other conditions of the world as it is, the 100 person population of the world would consist of:

52 Males; 70% non-white; 70% non-Christian
48 Females; 30% white; 30% Christian

as far as the distribution of this 100 people on the surface of the earth 56 people will be in Asia, 20 in Europe, 14 in America, and only 10 will live in Africa. Besides, 6 people
would have 59% of the total wealth of the world, and all of these 6 people would be living in America.

Regarding the standard of living, education, etc., according to Dr. Wilson’s calculations, 80% of the people would have a low standard of life; 70% would be illiterate; 50% would be malnourished; one person would be close to death; and one person would be about to be born. Only one person would be a college graduate and one person would have a computer.

Dr. Millymaki said that as a physician with love for humanity, a world citizen with moral and ethical ideal, justice and equality for all, shouldn’t we think that this situation is changeable? Is this a natural or inherent situation which no human power or profession [including medicine] can bring any change to it? If we believe that change should come, is it not fair to join those who believe in human rights, justice, equality, the bringing of the level of poverty and misery down and provide better ways of medical assistance? Dr. Millymaki, at the conclusion of her
speech said: “As a physician, our only responsibility in providing medical assistance to the people is not just the patients’ physical exam, prescription writing for medicine and performing physical surgery”. The index of health is having an education, a place to live, a means to live, clean drinking water and environmental health. We should know this also – advanced technology, state-of-the-art means of health, care cannot solve and will not be the solution for, the world health problems in the face of extreme poverty.

This was a brief example of what the president of WMA said about ethics = justice and equality in today’s world.

Advances in today’s medical technology are rapid throughout the world, especially in the West. Multiple and different health issues, from abortion to organ transplants, invitro-fertilization, genetic engineering, cloning of tissue, AIDS, and many other mental and psychological ailments have caused legal, religious and ethical problems and there is an outcry in medical circles,
courts of law, and attorneys’ offices. That is why today, more than at any other time, teaching and following the rules and principles of medical ethics is most important and beneficial. This is the reason that WHO has recommended that medical ethics not only be taught in medical schools, but courses and seminars for teaching medical ethics should be provided for all doctors.

Lately, UNESCO has started a program in which medical ethics is being taught in more than 50 countries of the world. This plan and the worldwide program is under the direction of Professor Amnan Carm, the Director of UNESCO’s office of Medical Ethics. Participating in this program are 124 professors from around the world, which gives glad tidings of a better practice of medicine in the future.

Thank you,