Ethical Issues in Pediatric Medicine

School of Medicine
University of Pennsylvania

Faculty

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The faculty are assisted by one or two teaching assistants from the medical student body.

Course Description

Ethical Issues in Pediatric Medicine is an elective course in the Medicine and Society Seminar series at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. The course is an introductory level, for-credit seminar, open to medical students in all four years of the medical school curriculum. The objective of the course is for students to develop skills to identify and analyze ethical issues in pediatric medical practice. The goal of the course is to provide medical students with a disciplined opportunity to become sensitive to ethical issues that will arise in the course of their clinical experiences and respond appropriately. Students also increase their cognitive skills, their self-understanding, and their regard for patients as persons.

Course Format

The seminar meets approximately bi-weekly, from October through March, from 5:30-7:00 P.M. Participants take turns bringing in refreshments for the group, since the meeting is close to the dinner hour.

The case-study method is used. Cases are drawn from the Hastings Center collection (see bibliography), from other cases found through student research, or from clinical experiences of the students and faculty.

Course Outline

1. Session one (led by faculty) - Expectations

   The following expectations are discussed with the students, and
the students are given the opportunity to comment on the course logistics, which may be re-negotiated as a result.

- Student presenters will meet with faculty to receive guidance in developing and refining their cases and presentation plans.

- Students will present cases and lead class discussions.

- Students are provided with a list of recommended readings, and are asked to purchase the text.

- The class hours and meeting schedule are discussed.

- The requirements for receiving grades of "pass" or "honors" are discussed. (Pass - attendance and participation in class discussion, including presentation of a case. Honors - meeting the requirements for a "pass," and preparation of a paper at a level acceptable to the faculty).

During this first session, the students receive an introduction to the intellectual discipline of ethics, which is presented as different from but as rigorous as the study of biomedical science. It is explained that most of the issues raised will be dilemmas; substantive arguments can be raised on at least two, frequently opposing, sides of an issue.

2. Session two - Selected Principles, Concepts, and Terms

This session introduces students to some of the most frequently used bioethical principles, concepts, and terms. These include: confidentiality; truth-telling; informed consent; patient autonomy or self-determination; withholding/withdrawing medical treatment; allocation (micro and macro); ontological status of early human life, beneficence and non-maleficence, justice and teleological and utilitarian ethics.

A case is then presented, encompassing some of the ethical concepts which have been discussed. A faculty member analyzes the case in terms of the applicable principles, methods, and schools of ethical thinking. The students then discuss the case and "vote" for the resolution of the case in one direction or the other, providing justifications for their decisions.

3. Sessions Three through Ten - Student Case Presentations

The students work in pairs to select develop and present cases. They select a case and present it first to the faculty for approval and guidance. The faculty may suggest additional readings or modification of the case, as appropriate. The faculty also assist the student in identifying the issues which should emerge during class discussions. The students make any necessary refinements to the case and circulate it to their classmates prior to the class meeting.

The student presenters lead the class and may use creative techniques in developing the discussion. Techniques used have included
role-playing in which individuals play the roles of the characters in
the case, and use of the class as a hospital "ethics committee." The
case presentation includes sufficient description of the medical
concepts involved for understanding of the case. Otherwise, the
presenters and faculty attempt to steer the discussion away from
medical management issues, in order to allow the ethical issues to
dominate. All opinions are tolerated and attempts are made to assure
that the opposing viewpoints emerge. It is expected that opinions
will be supported by reference to the appropriate ethical principles
or concepts.

For the most part, the faculty permit the student discussions to
progress unimpeded. The faculty watch for "teaching moments" when an
opportunity to illustrate a key point emerges in class discussion.

At the conclusion of the class, faculty members offer an evaluation
of the presentation for the benefit of those who have presented as
well as for those who have yet to present.

4. Session Eleven - Wrap Up

The final session provides an opportunity for students and faculty to
reflect on the seminar experience. Students are asked to share some
of the personal or clinical events that occurred during the course of
the seminar and to explain how the ethics course has affected their
views of the situations. The discussion combines the use of the
ethical analytical skills which they have gained with the sharing of
formative experiences and insights about themselves as emerging
physicians. The faculty provide the students with feedback regarding
how they have perceived the educational experience and the student
growth over the course of the seminar.

Evaluation

At the end of each class session, the students are asked to complete a
written evaluation of that session. In addition, the student teaching
assistant serves as an ombudsman, passing along student oral evaluations
to the faculty. A final written evaluation covers the seminar as a whole.

Bibliography (see attached)
BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR ID 300B - Ethical Issues in Pediatric Medical Practice

Required Texts


Recommended Reading


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