Ethical dilemmas no longer take a back seat in medicine

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Q&A: When the patient must always come first

• Some people say that medicine is a business, and that doctors can charge whatever they want, provided there is a willing buyer. What do you think?

A: The patients don’t just pay because doctors are dealing with patients’ lives, and these patients trust the doctors to do right by them. It’s not just about money, but should be the first consideration. Their first consideration must always be the health of the patient. It becomes clear why doctors think of themselves as independent rather than health professionals.

• Can you give an example of how bioethics worked with patients?

A: One case in point was when the amputated Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA) two years ago. There was a fair degree of discussion, and the Act in the final form was a good one. It was made very clear that people could not be bought or sold, and that they could be reimbursed for their medical expenses. That was common sense, but some doctors in the community were still not sure how that work.

• What are some of the most important local bioethic issues today?

A: As the world grows older, elderly and end-of-life issues are becoming more and more important. This includes issues like illness, palliative care, and community care, to avoid the inappropriate care of people who are dying.

• The question is: are you afraid that the patient is being treated in accordance with his or her wishes, and not those of the doctor? A: I am not a consultant, but the doctor should be sensitive to those wishes and preferences, and not make decisions in the patient’s best interests.

• What should doctors do to avoid such situations?

A: They should honour what the patient explicitly desires, and ensure that the patient is kept informed about his or her condition.

• What are the ethical issues that arise from the distribution of scarce medical resources?

A: This is a common issue, particularly in situations where there are limited resources. The question is: how should we allocate these resources fairly and equitably?

• How can we avoid such ethical dilemmas in the future?

A: The key is to have a well-developed bioethics framework in place to guide decision-making.