Ethics and family planning

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Abstract

Ethical problems in the area of contraception include the respect for the autonomy/integrity of the woman/couple and the question of justice. Three leading principles in Western moral philosophy are discussed and applied to contraceptive practice. To uphold the principle of autonomy, the personal choice of the woman/couple must always be respected. The question of beneficence and non-maleficence must first be related to the individual and only second to the society. The principle of justice implies that resources should be allocated to those who need them; access to contraception should not depend upon an ability to pay for the services.

If the 10-year-old United Nations ‘Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination of women’ is to come true during this decade, we must pay more attention to the respect for integrity and to the question of justice.

Introduction

In its wider sense, family planning includes not only contraception but also access to safe legal abortions, safe antenatal and obstetric care, and infertility investigation and treatment. Ethical discussions on the subject have until now mainly focused on the abortion issue and, during the last few years, also on infertility. Contraception has been left out of these discussions, probably because it was felt that there are no ethical problems in this area. In principle, most people agree that there are no ethical problems with contraceptive methods as such. There are, however, problems in other areas, namely the question of autonomy of the clients and their access to different methods and sometimes to family planning services as such. Two years ago, this issue was discussed in a substantial way at the Bangkok meeting in June 1988 titled ‘Ethics and human values in family planning’. The two ethicists, taking part in the
conferences, Samuel Gorowitz and Ruth Macklin, from the United States of America, both stressed the influence of religious, cultural, economic and political pluralism on family planning. [1,2]. Dr Macklin questioned whether there are any universal ethical principles which could be applied, disregarding the pluralism. She answered her question by pointing to the leading ethical principles drawn from the tradition of Western moral philosophy.

**Leading ethical principles**

*The principle of individual liberty or the principle of autonomy:* Individuals have the right to freedom of decision and action to the extent that their actions do not interfere with the rights of others. The philosopher J.S. Mill (a utilitarian) argues in his essay ‘On liberty’ [3] that social and political control over individual action is legitimate only if it is necessary to prevent harm to other individuals. The promotion of autonomy in his view maximizes the benefits of all concerned.

*The utilitarian principle:* Morally right actions or policies are those that result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

*The principle of justice:* All persons within a given society deserve equal access to goods and services that fulfil basic human needs.

These three principles apply generally to contraception but their specific application requires interpretation and analysis. People may agree on the principles, yet disagree on how they should be applied.

The principle of individual liberty may be interpreted as meaning that the woman/couple has the right to make reproductive decisions and act accordingly. To be able to make an informed consent, the woman/couple must be able to assess the consequences of the method and therefore adequate information on effectiveness and possible harms and benefits of the specific methods is needed.

A freedom of choice and an informed consent cannot be exercised fully if all possible options are not available to the woman/couple.

The basic rights of all couples to make family planning decisions is stated in the 1974 World Population Plan of Action as follows:

All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children, and to have the information, education and means to do so.

This implies that governments, groups or individuals should not interfere with the choice each couple makes about contraception. It also implies a responsibility for the government to ensure that the couples have the information, education and means to carry out their decisions. Following the ideas of J.S. Mills, restrictions of individual choice and reproductive autonomy should not be accepted if the restrictions have not