Teaching Ethics in Psychiatry

A Problem-Based Learning Approach

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During the last two decades, the teaching of ethics in the field of medicine, particularly in psychiatry, has become the subject of increased attention. For this type of training to be effective, it should be practical (as opposed to theoretical), focused on the decision-making process (as opposed to the rote learning of concepts), and, eventually, self-directed. This article suggests that a problem-based learning approach is an ideal method for reaching these goals. A case illustration is presented to underscore the effectiveness of the method, as well as a rationale for its use. This article will assist psychiatric educators in becoming familiar with this approach and will encourage them to use this method in their training programs. (Academic Psychiatry 1996; 20:144-149)

Although the literature on teaching ethics to medical students is abundant (1-4), only recently has interest in ethics training extended to psychiatric residency programs. This interest may be accompanied by the realization, on the part of psychiatric educators, that ethics training is better accomplished in a clinical as opposed to a classroom setting (5). Most psychiatric residents quickly realize that ethical codes learned in medical school provide limited guidance in ambiguous situations (6). Ethical dilemmas such as involuntary treatment, the special nature of confidentiality in psychiatry, and the tension between paternalism and beneficence make solid training in ethical decision making critical during the formative years of a psychiatric resident's training.

Clinical care is an ethics-using activity, as well as a science-using activity (7). To make good clinical decisions, psychiatric residents need to understand the ethical components involved in the process. It is of utmost importance to assist psychiatric residents to grasp the ethical norms concerning appropriate clinical behavior (8). Ethical principles should illuminate clinical practice rather than serve as a philosophical distraction from clinical care.

APPROACHES TO ETHICS TRAINING

Several different methods have been suggested for teaching ethics. These include modeling, a case-method approach, systematic seminars, and clinical ethics "rounds" conducted on the wards (9,10). While we
agree that all these approaches have some merit, we also feel that other methods could be more advantageous. It is difficult to dispute that faculty or mentor modeling is an ideal tool for teaching ethics. The difficulty with using modeling exclusively is that there has been a dearth of formal ethics training in the past, leaving the usual role models relatively unaware of substantial ethical issues.

While seminars may be useful in teaching subjects such as pharmacology, attempting to engage weary psychiatric residents in abstract philosophical discussion amidst their busy clinical schedules could be difficult. Ethics "rounds" are useful, in certain contexts, to analyze specific ethical issues. This method, however, requires an initial recognition of the ethical problem (5). In addition, clinical rounds are rarely an appropriate environment for frank discussion of personal biases about ethical issues. We suggest that effective ethical training is practical (as opposed theoretical), focused on the decision-making process (as opposed to rote conceptual learning), and, eventually, self-directed.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

Problem-based learning could be more effective than the previously mentioned approaches in teaching clinical and ethical decision making (11). This case-based method focuses on an immersion in, and interpretation of, specific details and problems of a case (12), precisely analogous to the usual clinical method in psychiatry. The problem-based approach deliberately focuses on the process of clinical reasoning. For instance, trainees, with the assistance of a faculty facilitator, work through the mechanics of problem identification (symptoms), hypothesis development (diagnosis), and hypothesis testing (treatment). Through this process, psychiatric residents are encouraged to frame their own learning issues and seek out information from experts and previously published materials. The problem-based learning approach is particularly applicable to ethical training because it provides psychiatric residents with an analytic framework that can be applied to future problems. This training is needed because physician feelings and intuition are often insufficient to resolve either ethical or clinical issues (13).

When faculty facilitators select clinical problems, crucial ethical issues should be illustrated. The learning value of these problems may be enhanced if appropriate clinical diagnosis and management are also stressed. However, faculty (as facilitators) must recognize that the body of medical and ethical literature may not be as complete as it should (14). High value should be placed on a resident's ability to use data, recognize and define problems, and evaluate situations.

These clinical skills are especially relevant to the desired outcomes of teaching ethics in psychiatric training programs. If used in small-group settings throughout all 4 years of psychiatric training, this approach can promote an openness that serves to highlight the numerous sets of values and differences in personal approaches to an illustrative case. The expertise of both faculty and residents must be respected to promote critical thinking (15). Trainees are encouraged to follow the facilitator's behavior in asking for reasons and justifications.

This is particularly effective if the group facilitator is willing to reveal his or her own biases without providing an "answer." The case method is an intrinsic part of psychiatric training. The advantage of its use in training related to ethical decision making lies in the links to be made between psychiatrists' regular clinical activities and ethical issues (16).

During the 1994-1995 academic year, the senior author informally tested the concept of this method by using case-centered discussions while holding some ethics seminars to PGY-4 residents of the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences of the University of Texas/Houston Health Science...