Medical Data and Applied Ethics: Part I

Edmond A. Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol36/iss3/14
Medical Data and Applied Ethics - - Part I

Edmond A. Murphy, M.D., Sc.D.

There has been long recognition that Medicine, because of its human context, gives rise to important ethical problems; and, for better or for worse, Medical Ethics is a well-established subject.

But there is now a newly awakened feeling that the area should be radically reworked and this for two major reasons. In the first place, there is in the field of Medicine a massive increase in factual knowledge: in certain cases, such as the progestational agents or cardiac transplantation, this knowledge has presented ethical problems calling for urgent solution. No longer only the massive accumulation of facts has presented ethical problems; and, for better or for worse, the general attitude of its members is one of more or less open hostility towards such an idea.

In the past, the pronouncements of specialists have been held in a aura of quite spurious definiteness: the theologian has felt that the medical facts and ideas in the light of which he has been called on to decide an appropriate course of action, are much more definite than is the case. Conversely, the medical practitioner seeking advice on an ethical problem has received exaggerated ideas of the refinement of the philosopher's opinion.

This series of papers has been written in the belief that much can be gained by clearing away some of these misconceptions, and while I realize that this is likely to cast me in the role of a nihilist, nevertheless I believe there is more faith in honest doubt than there is in accepting a mass of plausible but specious arguments. It would be better to suspend belief indefinitely then to be content with the fruit of unsound scholarship.

At the outset there are three major classes of problems to confront:

I. Semantic problems
II. Problems over the sources of fact
III. Problems over the interpretation of fact

We may, with advantage, consider each in turn in a separate paper.

SEMANTIC PROBLEMS

The epistemological watchword of the age is semantics. It may seem tedious to labor this topic but it is indeed a matter of the first magnitude; and since the present context operates at several levels of subtlety it will bear some brief consideration.

a. In discussion of medical topics by those outside the profession confusion arises over the technical use of lay words. The theologian is familiar with this difficulty. When he says "I believe in the apostolic succession," and the nutritionist says "I believe in supplementary vitamins," it should be clear enough that the word "believe" is being used in two different senses. Likewise "hope" in the lay and in the theological senses do not mean precisely the same thing.

b. The second source of difficulty is the converse of the first, where a word, which is from the start technical, undergoes a perversion of its meaning by the careless usages of the ill-informed. Several examples will at once suggest themselves to the theologian. Charity has come in a popular sense to mean the rather condescending bestowal of material things. Abstinence is commonly confused with fasting, calumny with detraction, fornication with adultery.

The medical profession is much more at the mercy of this perversion of meaning because of the promulgation of what passes for truth in the popular press. The term "hysteria" among non-medical people commonly connotes melodramatic screaming fits and not a subtle and pleomorphic psychological disturbance. Many lay people might be surprised to know the meaning of the word "allergy" - not exclusively to denote a malignant, cancerous growth, but in a much broader sense to mean any autochthonous, space-occupying mass whatsoever. Again the word "diseased" in the lay mind is used in the sense that the part concerned is infected i.e. has been invaded by foreign organisms whereas the pathologist would use the term in a wider sense to indicate that for any reason whatever the limits of the normal have been transgressed.

c. One of the advantages of a technical vocabulary is that it has a relatively stable meaning. Nevertheless
vitamin B12 and corrected by the technical terms, like the ideas which now taken to mean a megaloblastic administration of intrinsic factor. The suffices to say that vitamin B12 was thing like a century after the disease not identified until 1948, (1,2), some­ been expressed in such basic terms.

but while we must beware of what long-standing idea has automatically snobbery” theology

1855.
time and the vagaries of fashion - nevertheless the expert on Medical references are modern. A major way Ethics is well-advised to ensure that his

because he was the son of a physician, thought in terms of categories. This fourth class of Mendelian genetics has thrown up many further examples - for instance, patients can be usefully categorized according to blood groups, hemoglobin types, and certain enzyme peculiarities. But it is important to realize that these in­

The intricacies of Mendelian genetics have thrown up many further examples - for instance, patients can be usefully categorized according to blood groups, hemoglobin types, and certain enzyme peculiarities. But it is important to realize that these in­

which true categorizations oc •

either have symptoms or be healthy. White pointed this out many years ago. (5)

May there not be quite extensive change in the coronary arteries of many of us, even with narrowing and perhaps small or gradual symptomless occlusions here and there, with no angina pectoris or perfectly normal electrocardiograms?... It is a comfort for the patient to realize that there is not actually a 100 per cent difference between its coronaries and those of his friend who feels perfectly well; there may be only these in four per cent. He, himself, may be just over the threshold of clinical evidence and his friend just under.”

The threshold of narrowing is like the doorway six feet high - the separation it produces is sharp but it is a separa­

but this does not mean that there is a discontinuity of the structural changes in the coronary arteries. There is presumably some critical degree of narrowing of the arteries at which blood flow to the heart muscle becomes inadequate and symptoms appear. But there is no reason for supposing that those in whom the impairment is slightly less than critical are healthy. White pointed this out many years ago. (5)

It may be that the categorization is of the same kind as the ability to get through the doorway not only unbowed but also unbloody. The classes of “tall” and “short” people can be changed in a quite arbitrary
fashion by changing the height of the door. Likewise, the categorization into "normal" and "hypertensive" can be altered by an arbitrary choice of the upper limit of normal blood pressure — certainly no natural cleavage point between the two has been demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction.

This basic difficulty must not distract us from the indisputable point that there are better and worse blood pressures. Those with unusually high blood pressures are much less likely to survive and maintain good health for any long period of time. But the transition from this state of jeopardy to optimal health is a gradual one; at no point is there an abrupt deterioration in prognosis associated with a small rise in blood pressure. And certainly from a medical standpoint — from consideration of pathogenesis, prognosis or treatment — there is nothing to be gained by converting what is a graded state into an artificial categorization.

Perhaps the one exception to this generalization is the demands of administration. There are situations in which despite the indefiniteness of the notion of hypertension it is necessary to force an artificial dichotomization. It may be a problem of early induction of labor in a "hypertensive" patient. Whatever we may feel about the graduated character of blood pressure, induction of labor is not graduated: it is a strictly all-or-none (quintal) decision.

However, such outcomes are for the most part accidentally quantal. When the standard treatment for severe hypertension consisted of the operation known as sympathectomy there was little opportunity for graduation of treatment: once the surgeon decided to operate at all, he might as well do a thorough job. But when the operation was replaced by treatment with the first effective antihypertensive drugs, treatment could no longer be graduated to produce the desired effect; and since to have a sustained effect drug treatment must be perpetual, the decision to treat is completely reversible and the original state of the patient could be restored in those cases where the treated state was, for one reason or another, unacceptable. Thus the spurious idea of "tallness" was a fiction which no longer had to be maintained. In the same way should a suitable medical treatment emerge for high blood pressure in pregnancy, it would no longer be necessary to pretend that there is a categorically distinct state of "hypertension" in pregnancy.

THE NOTION OF DISEASE

The foregoing considerations raise the question of how far it is necessary and useful to defend the notion of "disease". The term might be understood in two senses. It might mean "tallness", be used in a very loose sense, to convey a vague attribute of descriptive value but not suitable as a term in a rigorous argument; or it might be considered an exact statement for use in arriving at agent conclusions. Let the reader consider the two principles, "Tall criminals should not be executed" and "Pregnant criminals should not be executed": he will see that the latter principle only would be logically workable. The fundamental question then is which of these states the notion of disease resembles.

There is, I think, no easy answer to this question. "Disease" is used to denote two quite distinct things: a process which is in no sense in the interests of the body; and a process which tends to restore the status quo and may therefore be regarded as homeostatic.

Thus a cancer is, as we at present understand it, a disorder of growth control (associated with other abnormalities) so that the tissue concerned proliferates without regard to the body's economy.

Now quite different from this is the inflammatory process. Superficially it may resemble a cancer but the manifestations are for the most part the effects of processes tending to dispose of foreign bacteria or harmful physical or chemical stimuli. The increased blood flow, for instance, promotes lymph production which dilutes toxins and increases the supply of white cells and of antibiotics. But it also makes the inflamed part hot, red and swollen. These signs then are other things being equal) welcome indications of an adequate response to injury; and ordinarily medical effort is not directed to abating them. By contrast the manifestations of cancer do not apparently correspond to any useful response and the aim of treatment is to abolish them.

It is thus easy to see that by any reckoning, cancer is an abnormal state; but it is very far from obvious that inflammation is. It is doubtful true that the cause which has provoked the inflammation is in some sense "abnormal"; but insults of this kind are ubiquitous and to contend that everyone is perpetually in an abnormal state is manifestly a meaningless statement.

"What did they live on?" said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking.

"They lived on treacle" said the Dormouse, after thinking a minute or two. "They couldn't have done that, you know", Alice gently remarked. "They'd have been ill."

"So they were" said the Dormouse; "very ill." (9)

To revert to the subject of hypertension in the light of this distinction we can see a major problem arising. While the behavior of the population as a whole suggests that a blood pressure of say 230/120 is associated with a shorter expectation of life than average, it is also true that the patient's compensatory mechanisms vigorously resist therapeutic attempts to change the blood pressure to more "desirable" levels. However if with sufficiently vigorous treatment this resistance can be overcome, the evidence suggests that a normal prognosis is restored. It thus appears that in such cases the body's notion of the normal (if one may be permitted to anthropomorphize a functional (and speech) is perverted. Whether this defect is due to genetic factors or represents a permanent deformation of the homeostatic mechanism by some environmental insult, remains to be seen. But it is at least clear that something like a constructive mechanism may be at work which nevertheless in no sense tends to produce an optimum state.

If I may attempt to summarize this difficult section, clearly there are at least three kinds of states to which the term "disease" is promiscuously applied.

(1) "Purposive" reactions to environmental insult, tending to restore the optimal state or something close to it. The clinical manifestations of disease commonly represent the operation of these compensatory mechanisms.
(2) Similar to (1) but where the compensatory mechanisms are operating towards an objective which is itself harmful or relatively harmful.

(3) Operations which are completely anarchical and not directed by any consideration for the body's economy.

Without pretending to have seen the full ethical implications of these thoughts I consider it at least likely that the ethical arguments based on these heterogeneous usages of the term "disease" may turn out to be quite diverse.

CONCLUSION

It is well to remember that medicine began as a practical art and has in fact evolved little beyond that. This lack of abstraction has not in fact obtruded itself on the consciousness of the medical profession and there is certainly an exaggerated belief in the degree to which current ideas have been crystalized. This belief has been further enhanced in the minds of those outside the profession; and if ethical principles are to be based on sound scholarship, a much more radical analysis will be necessary.

The simplest and most readily remediable difficulties center on the use of words. The modern philosopher and, increasingly, the modern scientist are aware of this problem and how it is to be circumvented.

But the study of ideas is another matter. By way of illustration the idea of "disease" has been fairly fully worked out. Many such ideas current in medicine are of a comparable degree of complexity and will require to be examined in at least as much detail if fruitful dialogue is to be achieved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

5. White, P.D. Heart Disease, Macmillan, New York, 3rd edition, 1949, p. 18
9. Dodgson, C.L., Alice in Wonderland. Chapter 7
10. Murphy, E.A. A scientific viewpoint on normacy. Persp. Biol. and Med 10333, 1966

Latin American
Doctor Development Program
Vitale H. Paganelli, M. D.

"In 1961 the UN General Assembly and President John F. Kennedy designated the 1960's as the Decade of Development. The projected goal was to increase the flow of assistance from rich nations to poor ones to about one percent of the gross national product. Now, eight years later, it appears that this Decade of Development has been a decade of disillusion. The transfer of one percent of the GNP to developing countries was never realized. The 'haves' countries have grown richer and the 'have nots' poorer."

"The common good in our day has definitely ceased to be just the common good of the nation and it has not yet succeeded in becoming the common good of the civilized world community. It tends, however, toward the latter". J. Martian, "The Person and the Common Good". University of Notre Dame Press, 1966.

He has put down the mighty from their throne and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.


Several years ago the idea of educating a Latin American native to be a Physician-Missionary in his own Diocese was conceived and this year the Albany, New York, St. Luke's Diocesan Guild has given birth to this idea in Panama.

Dr. Paganelli, a frequent contributor to the Linacre Quarterly, is in private practice in Glens Falls, N.Y.

This program essentially consists in sponsoring an academically qualified, preferably financially indigent, native student in a Latin American medical college.

Our student was selected from among more than forty applicants by a committee of Panamanians which consisted of three laymen appointed by Archbishop McGrath of Panama. The student, in addition to meeting the financial and academic qualifications, has been selected specifically for his motivation to serve his Catholic faith via a direct service to his own people.

To the surprise and delight of our Albany Physician's Guild, the Panamanian laymen in awarding this scholarship laid down additional criteria of their own initiative. They insisted, (1) that the student must maintain his scholastic average within the upper one-third of his class, (2) that he must maintain moral standards consonant with his professed Christian convictions, (3) that he must practice in his own country for no less than five years, and, (4) that within ten years of his graduation he must return fifty percent of the scholarship funds to a permanently continuing scholarship committee so that other worthy Panamanian students may profit from the advantage he has gained. It is hoped on our part that following