

3 Ethical principles for the medical profession

This chapter sets out to define the term 'ethics', briefly introduces the reader to current frameworks for ethical thinking, summarises the key ethical principles for good medical practice, presents the codes of ethics that guide the medical profession and identifies the qualities or virtues to which good doctors should aspire. The chapter is intended to provide a foundation for the ethical dimensions of issues addressed in later chapters. Modern doctors must be cognisant of the needs and rights of the individual patient, aware of the rights of patient's relatives, carers and guardians, alert to issues such as cultural and language barriers, sensible in the use of health resources, familiar with complaints processes, and involved in maintenance of professional competence and their own health. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, doctors who possess good communication skills, respect their patients, have a broad knowledge of ethics and the law relating to medical practice, and are willing to consult more experienced colleagues when needed will be well-equipped to resolve most of the ethical dilemmas that they will encounter in the daily practice of their profession.

More detailed historical or theoretical studies of medical ethics or in-depth discussion of the application of medical ethics in specific subjects areas such as in-vitro fertilisation, human cloning, euthanasia, and organ transplantation are beyond the scope of this book. A suggested reading list is provided at the end of this chapter for those seeking to commence a more detailed study of medical ethics.

3.1 Some historical context

Codes or statements of ethical principles have existed to guide medical practitioners for almost 2500 years. The basis for the principles contained in the modern codes originated in Greece through what is usually termed the Hippocratic Oath. Hippocrates was born on the island of Kos in 460 BCE and was responsible for the beginnings of a scientific approach to medicine through his teaching and practice of medicine in Greece. His teachings covered all branches of medicine and included the moral and ethical requirements of an ideal physician, which were subsequently epitomised in the Hippocratic Oath. His writings are collected into the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, comprising 70 books, although most of these were probably written by his disciples after his death [1].

While the Hippocratic Oath is frequently used as a starting point to introduce the topic of medical ethics, in its original form it is controversial whether it could serve modern society well and whether it could effectively guide modern medicine or the medical profession [2-4]. It identifies some key issues that still underpin more modern ethical codes, including the concepts of ‘first, do no harm’, abuse of privilege, confidentiality, respect for life and awareness of one’s limitations. However, as discussed below, many medical professional bodies, international and national, now publish ethical codes and more detailed guides to professional conduct [5-8]. Many medical schools in Australia [9] and abroad [10,11] have maintained or re-introduced the swearing of modernised ‘Hippocratic’ oaths for medical students at graduation ceremonies. However, medical education does not rely on this symbolic practice and instead concentrates on providing education in ethical, legal and professional development issues in an integrated manner through the entire medical student curricula, and (to a lesser extent to date) through postgraduate curricula [12].

3.2 What are ethics?

When we speak of ethics in a modern sense, we refer to a systematic approach as to how we as individuals or as a society wish to live our lives, expressed as an ‘ethos’, meaning a way of life. Ethics and ethical codes can then be seen as

an accumulation of values and principles that address questions of what are good or bad in human affairs. Ethics searches for reasons for acting or refraining from acting; for approving or not approving conduct; for believing or denying something about virtuous or vicious conduct or good or evil rules [13].

As this book addresses both ethical and legal issues in the practice of medicine, it is important for doctors to appreciate that ethics and the law are quite different concepts, although in most areas of medical practice they may often seem to be closely aligned. When faced with clinical decisions involving ethical considerations, recourse to what the law says will generally only be a starting point for ethical reflection. The law is in essence a system of rules developed by government on behalf of a community to regulate the interaction between individuals and the state, to which system the community agrees to be bound.