

A Bioethical Model for Emergency Medical Response

Omar Ha-Redeye, AAS, BHA, CNMT, RT(N)(ARRT)

INTRODUCTION

The three principles of ethics in healthcare as described by some ethicists are beneficence, justice, and autonomy.³ To our knowledge, nobody has attempted to reconcile these principles to date with classical ethical theory. Industries outside of healthcare have previously applied a tripartite model of analysis to classical ethical theory.⁵ Based on this template, we suggest that the three bioethical principles can be roughly corresponded with the ethical theories of utilitarianism, deontologicalism, and virtue ethics. Further distinctions in ethical approaches can be refined at the intersection of these historically separate ideologies.¹⁴

BACKGROUND

Emergency response has typically employed a strictly beneficent utilitarian approach, seeking to maximize goodness for the greatest number. The deliberate attempt here is to circumvent procedural limitations that could potentially impede emergency medical response.¹⁶

Medicine began with a strong emphasis on the individual patient, using Hippocratic Ethics. It subsequently moved away from autonomy as a focus and developed a different approach by combining beneficence with the justice principles.¹² The modified utilitarian-deontological ethos of rule consequentialism, utilizing beneficence with some of the structure provided by justice theory, is typically what characterizes standard medical care to this day.¹⁶

The limitations of operating strictly within the sphere of beneficence are that they can perpetuate injustices by evading impartiality and integrity. Strict beneficence can also provide an impersonal view of life, and ignore cultural relativism in certain settings.⁸

Although rule consequentialism incorporates the procedural safeguards of the justice principle, this approach is also highly susceptible to paternalistic tendencies as it ignores the bioethical principle of autonomy and undermines informed consent and joint decision making.¹⁰

SUMMARY

In the modern era a greater emphasis of autonomy has re-emerged with the taking the choices and preferences of patients being taken into consideration.^{11,12} Client-centered care is taking a greater predominance among the medical profession. Medical advances mean that most emergency responses quickly progress to more stable rehabilitative and psychosocial care.^{2,9} There is a need for incorporation of these principles of autonomy in emergency medical relief to create a more balanced approach towards emergency medical response.¹⁰

Case studies in emergent medical relief has demonstrated that different approaches have respective shortcomings that can be summarized by over-sights in ethical principles.⁵ Delineating the advantages and limitations of various ethical thought can have practical consequences, both for the training of emergency medical responders, and also in the evaluation of strategic planning. An approach that carefully considers and incorporates the ideals of all ethical perspectives can be a useful tool in emergency medical response.⁴

APPLICATION

Managers operating in emergent situations can quickly evaluate the merits of different decisions and identify shortcomings of each in the interests of formulating strategies that considers all ethical perspectives.

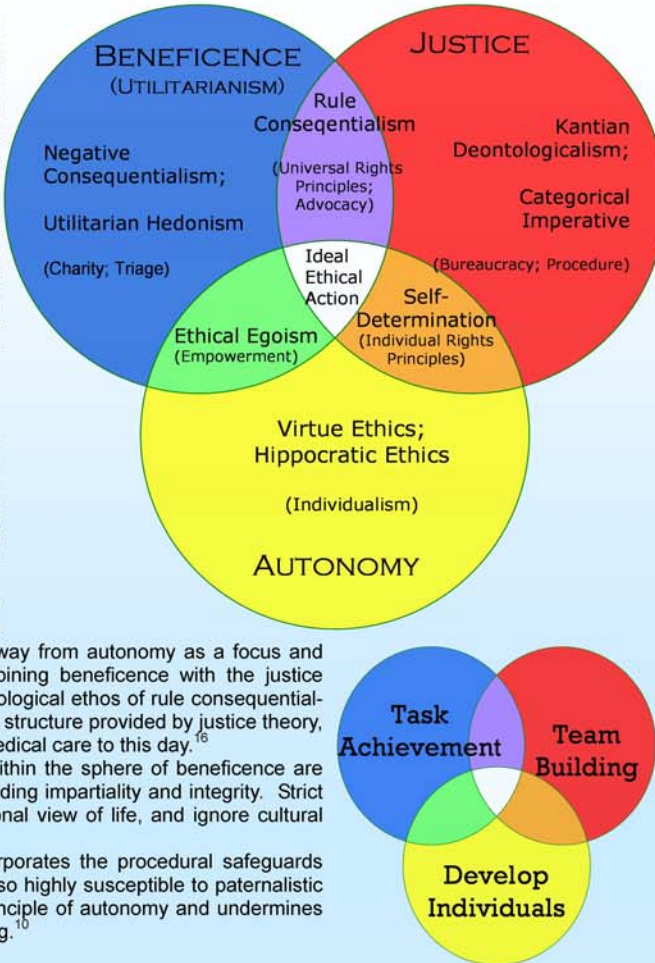
However, managers can also train responders to be sensitive to ethical nuances by utilizing the Action Centered Leadership approach long employed by the British Navy.¹ Beneficence principles can be developed by "Task Achievement" training, justice through "Team Building," and autonomy through "Individual Development."

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Focusing on task achievement helps to identify the ends that are intended to be accomplished, that often corresponding to the superordinate goals of the organization related to its values, vision, and mission statement.⁸

Team building may employ drills, exercises and scenarios to review protocols and achieve proficiency in operational procedures.

Individual development can be used to refine personal characteristics of responders through coaching and counseling, but to also develop a nuanced perception of different situations.¹⁵ This would introduce elements of relativism into response teams in order to achieve cultural competency and contingency approaches when utilizing predetermined procedural guidelines.⁶



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| Bioethics Principles | Ethical Theories | Summary | Characteristics | Shortcomings | Examples |
|------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Beneficence | Negative Consequentialism; Utilitarian Hedonism | Minimize bad consequences; Maximize common good at any expense | Triage, charity | Impersonal view of life, may perpetuate injustices; undermines informed consent and joint decision making | Emergency room |
| Justice | Kantian Deontologicalism; Categorical Imperative | Self action for all situations; decisions based on duty and rights of others | Bureaucracy; procedure | Inflexible, inefficient, red tape can render ineffective for practical purposes | Procedure wait times |
| Autonomy | Virtue Ethics; Hippocratic Ethics | Right character, not right action; Protect from harm and promote welfare of single patient | Individualism | Can undermine group cohesiveness; may ignore choices of patients with different needs; impractical in mass casualty situations | Risks in alternative medicine |
| Beneficence Justice | Rule Consequentialism | Rules of justice based on the results they create | Universal rights principles; advocacy | Susceptible to paternalistic tendencies; ignores cultural relativism | Most of historical healthcare |
| Beneficence Autonomy | Ethical Egoism | Actions should be governed by own's own self-interest | Empowerment | Overlooks effects of actions on others; application of universal justice | Abortion, 2-tiered system |
| Justice Autonomy | Self-Determination | Everyone has entitlement to their own action | Individual Rights Principles | Individual entitlements can often conflict; eludes a standard definition of beneficent action | Assisted suicide |
| Beneficence Justice Autonomy | ? | Ideal ethical action | All of the above | ? | ? |