Doctors’ moral dilemma — demand or necessity

The writer says that as professionals, doctors keep patient's interest above all else. However, doctors face a moral dilemma for acting on demands rather than necessity.
— Picture by AFP

THE practice of medicine should be executed on the foundations of ethical professional practice.

Professionals mean a member of a profession. In practice, it denotes the standards of education and training that prepare members of a profession with the particular skills and knowledge to perform the role as a professional. Those who are specialists will have to perform at a much higher level, as expected of them.

Doctors and specialists are assured to perform within the set norms for the standard of care in medical practice. Doctors also need to patent adhere to acceptable ethical standards.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy dealing with values pertaining to human conduct which takes into consideration right and wrong of actions, the good and bad of the motives, and the ends of such actions.

The professional on entering the practice is educated and familiarises the responsibility of adhering to the standards of ethical practice and conduct set by the profession. Some of these standards are codified but moral and ethical values may not be clearly defined or delineated as there are many grey areas that doctors and patients need to traverse and navigate with thought and care.

Some patients and doctors may have or believe in their own set of ethical values which may not necessarily be in line with the thinking and beliefs of the rest in the profession or society. Each individual has his own ingrained vision and beliefs as regards ethics and moral values when practicing medicine or receiving medical treatment. Race, gender, cultural and religious values may sometimes impinge upon and affect the generally acceptable standards of ethical professional practice. Doctors take these beliefs and values into consideration when providing care but when these are not in line with the acceptable ethical values they may refuse or choose not to follow patients' instructions which of course need to be conveyed to the patient.

Professional ethics encompasses the personal, organisational and corporate standards of behaviour expected of professionals in medical practice. Professionals exercise specialist knowledge and skills but medicine is not an exact science. Thus medical professionals would exhibit various differing ways in managing a case.

Whilst the profession may dictate the best mode of performing a certain procedure, ethics would seek answers as to why that's the best way and whether it is justifiable by moral and ethical standards. These are the path plans doctors adopt when providing care.

Many medical organisations, academies and councils have chosen to formulate ethical professional practice, so as to crystallise those ideas, thoughts and beliefs into setting the standards and paving the way for rational decision-making in treating patients.

In Malaysia, the regulatory body for doctors, the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC), formulates ethical guidelines and 'dictates' the way. Other medical bodies like the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) play an advisory role on these matters. This would be for the benefit of patients and doctors. MMA does not regulate but would refer the matter to MMC if there is an ethical derivation to the MMC.

Ethical and moral values certainly need to evolve with changing times and attitudes that affect the way society views these ethical and moral dilemmas. It appears moral values are becoming more narrowly conservative, being heavily influenced by religious and cultural values. This added to the conundrum to doctors in medical practice.

The face of medicine is fast changing due to the rapid advances in research and treatment modalities, along with the gauzy technological advances. Occasionally, market forces seem to influence how medicine is practised. Professionals seem to be pushed towards wary away from the basics, as patients become more immersed and reliant on machines, gadgets, wizardry diagnostic inventions and sophisticated non-invasive interventions to manage patients.

But are they really vital to be followed in a standardised manner to manage patients? Is it fair for the patient to ‘demand’ a series of investigations or a doctor to institute a panoply of investigations just to be safe?

Some of the ‘unnecessary’ practices espoused have been due to doctors having to practise defensive medicine in view of rising litigation. But these are added burdens to the patient. In most cases, they are justified but the doctor is morally bound to explain the chosen path though it may be riddled with additional costs.

Some patients demand highly sophisticated surgery when simpler methods would suffice. Should Caesarian sections be done on demand? Patients seek the easy way out by choosing 'pillars' procedures. However, doctors face a moral dilemma for acting on demands rather than necessity for the patient.

It becomes catastrophic experience if there is a misadventure following the chosen path by patients. It is an ethical predicament that doctors rather avoid.

As professionals, doctors keep patient’s interest above all else. The primary obligation will be to cause no harm. When professionals provide this specialised service to the public, it is governed by generally acceptable moral and ethical values according to the general expectations of all, most importantly the patient’s.

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