#### Bioethics

**“As to diseases, make a habit of two things — to help, or at least, to do no harm.”  
 Hippocrates**

*Bioethics* is an evolving, multidisciplinary field concerned with the impact of life and health sciences on society. It also studies ethical, social and legal issues that arise due to biomedical advances, as in the field of genetic engineering.

*Medical ethics* is a main branch of bioethics that focuses on issues pertaining to health care.

* *Clinical medical ethics* deals with ethical issues arising in medical practice and aims to assist physicians in making decisions with respect to patients’ rights.
* *Biomedical* *research ethics* deals with a wide range of issues concerning the conduct of research that includes activities involving interventions on human beings.
* *Public health ethics* focuses on the moral justification of policies, as well as the law to promote public health.
* *Environmental ethics* is also considered a branch of bioethics, expanding its traditional boundaries. It studies the relation of human beings with the natural world and addresses ethical issues in order to preserve biodiversity and protect the natural environment.

## The term *bioethics* was coined in 1926 by Fritz Jahr, a protestant theologian, in an article published in the journal Kosmos. Jahr, describing man’s use and abuse of the living environment, suggested that all living beings and not only humans are entitled to respect, a concept he later termed 'bioethical imperative'. Later, In 1970, Van Rensselaer Potter, an [American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) [biochemist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biochemist) used the term [*bioethics*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bioethics) to describe the science of survival, seeking to integrate biology, medicine, ecology, and human values.

**A study that was conducted in the USA between 1932-1972, namely *The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male*, prompted the development of what would become modern medical ethics. In this experiment, six hundred rural black men in Alabama suffering from syphilis were observed over the course of their lives. They were not allowed to know what they were diagnosed with nor did they receive treatment for this debilitating disease. This was done so that the natural history of syphilis in Blacks would be recorded. Consequently, many men died of complications of the disease and some of their wives and children contracted the disease, as well.**

##### The Principles of Bioethics

## In 1979, two American philosophers, Thomas Beauchamp and James Childress published the first edition of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, offering an analysis of the core moral principles that should apply to biomedical sciences which are the following:

## The Principle of Autonomy

* The Principle of Beneficence
* The Principle of Nonmaleficence
* The Principle of Justice

Beauchamp and Childress also mentioned other principles which include:

* The Principle of Confidentiality
* The Principle of Honesty

##### The Principle of Autonomy

*Respect for autonomy* is a fundamental principle implying that every mentally competent adult has the absolute right and freedom to make judgments and decisions regarding health care procedures. Since antiquity, the practice of medicine has been characterized by paternalistic behaviour as the physician has been given the role of the mediator between God and the patient. *Medical paternalism* is a concept that refers to the doctor making decisions about treatment procedures ‘for the patient’s good’, without first informing him in detail and ignoring his desires. Beauchamp and Childress were writing at a time when the paternalistic approach went as far as performing involuntary sterilizations. However, medical paternalism has been restricted throughout the years by the patient’s free will.

The concepts of *informed consent*and *informed refusal* arise from the ethical principle of patient autonomy and basic human rights. Informed consent is the process of getting permission before conducting a medical intervention on a person after he has been fully informed of the risks and benefits of the treatment, as well as of the consequences if he refuses (informed refusal). Mentally competent patients can give or deny consent for diagnostic or therapeutic interventions, based upon a clear understanding of the facts, regardless of the expected outcome. The doctor’s professional autonomy is expressed in making critical decisions while confronting ethical dilemmas in cases where there are conflicting alternatives.

The Principle of Beneficence

The principle of beneficence requires that healthcare professionals be of benefit to others. They have the moral obligation to treat patients with extreme care, offering more than the bare minimum. Additionally, they need to take positive action in order to prevent any potential harm. Moreover, they are required to palliate the patient by providing relief from the symptoms and the stress of illness, by being compassionate, understanding, and empathetic in their *bedside manner*.

The Principle of Nonmaleficence

The principle of nonmaleficence refers to the obligation of physicians to not intentionally harm the patient, either through acts of commission or omission. Although in medical practice mistakes may occur, health care professionals are called to protect their patients from any harm and not cause pain or suffering. According to Beauchamp and Childress, anything unnecessarily or unjustifiably harmful must be avoided. The crucial questions before proceeding to any procedure involving potential harmare whether the benefits outweigh the harm and whether different procedures might attain the same result without causing harm.

The Principle of Justice

In bioethics, the principle of justice seeks to eliminate discrimination. It refers to everyone having the right of access to healthcare services, as well as fair and equal treatment without prejudice, that is regardless of sex, race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, social or economic status, etc. The doctor’s views on the patient’s lifestyle or beliefs must not affect the care provided.

The Principle of Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a core principle in the alliance built between a physician and a patient, while both are struggling for the latter’s well-being. Healthcare professionals have access to sensitive personal data about patients. Consequently, they have both a legal and an ethical duty to keep this information confidential in order to maintain trust. Before disclosing any information to a third party, a medical professional should seek the patient’s consent to the disclosure. Respecting privacy and maintaining confidentiality is a doctor’s main concern as an application of the autonomy principle.

**The Principle of Honesty**

The principle of honesty requires that doctor-patient communication be characterized by complete honesty and sincerity, with no intention of misleading one another.

**Ethical Decision Making**

The principles of bioethics constitute the framework of ethical decision making in healthcare. These principles function as a guide for health care professionals, particularly when they face a moral dilemma. However, the Law plays a vital role concerning morality in clinical practice.

Consequently, the morally acting clinician should have the flexibility and wisdom that is gained primarily from experience to be able to resolve any issue arising from the patient’s data by taking into consideration the fundamental principles of Medical Ethics, statutory rules, the patient’s right to self-determination and his own conscience, with the ultimate aspiration to sustain or improve the patient’s physical or mental health and relieve him from pain.

#### The Hippocratic Oath

The origins of medical ethics lie in the Hippocratic Oath, the most widely known Greek medical text, written in Ionic Greek about 2500 years ago. It constitutes the ethical code of doctors, held sacred by physicians from antiquity to this day. The principles of confidentiality, ‘benefit’ and ‘non-harm’ are described in it, and physicians swear to uphold these ethical ideals.

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The Hippocratic Oath