

BOOK REVIEW

Practical Medical Ethics

Alastair Campbell, Grant Gillett and
Gareth Jones
Oxford University Press, 184p

The authors in the Preface describe as their intentions for this book that it be of practical value - "of immediate relevance to health care professionals and to the users of health services". Although the particular readership they have in mind is stated to be medical students and medical practitioners at all stages of their careers they express the hope that the book will "attract a wide readership from outside the medical profession". Does the book meet those aims?

In eleven chapters and three appendices the book covers a wide range of ethical issues, beginning in Chapter 1 with a readable discussion of the philosophical basis of medical ethics and finishing in Appendix 3 with a three page summary of recent issues in genetics. There is clearly a sequence to the chapters. Chapter 2 entitled "The Healing Ethos" is about patient relationships, information and consent, confidentiality and truthfulness. It is followed by a chapter on the human body. This, although mainly about the value and potential abuse of the dead also includes a short section on organ transplantation. Successive chapters then cover issues before birth (a discussion of the status of the fetus, abortion, fetal research etc) and neonatal and childhood issues. The chapter on medical research includes the kinds of issues that are the concern of research ethics committees and researchers. Chapter 7 "Medicine and Society" discusses the concepts of justice and resource allocation. "Ending Human Lives" is the title of the 8th chapter. It discusses

issues such as facing death, suicide and euthanasia and leads on to chapter 9 entitled "AIDS: Poison in the Spice of Life". Ethical issues surrounding HIV testing, doctor/patient relationships and confidentiality of terminal illness are covered. Chapter 10 entitled "Mad, Bad, Sad or Glad" covers ethical problems in psychiatry including compulsory treatment, psychosurgery and ECT and issues relating to reproduction and sexuality in the mentally impaired. Finally a chapter on ethics, etiquette and malpractice deals with doctor/doctor relationships, medical discipline and matters such as incompetence, negligence, incapacity and misconduct. There is a brief epilogue about the ACC and the right to sue. Appendix I: "Codes of Ethics", reproduces the texts of the Hippocratic Oath and three major international Codes of Ethics. Appendix II is a brief statement about biculturalism and New Zealand medical ethics and as already stated Appendix III is a brief statement about genetic issues. There is an extensive bibliography and index.

This book is a delight to read. There is a good balance between philosophical ethics and practical considerations, the former always being discussed in the context of the latter and illustrated by appropriate short case studies. The book would be easily understood by anybody who has a rudimentary understanding of ethics. Where appropriate the authors have discussed issues in the light of New Zealand law and experience. For example there is a brief example about the National standards for research ethics committees, the accident compensation legislation and so on. This, in my opinion although enhancing its value to New Zealand readers, would not detract from its interest for foreign readers.

There is very little missing from the book that I would have expected to be contained in such a volume. One area that is not mentioned is the relationship between health professionals and the pharmaceutical industry but it is a minor omission given the broad scope and encapsulated wisdom which the book represents.

The authors, Professor Campbell, Dr Grant Gillett and Professor Gareth Jones are all faculty members in the School of Medicine, University of Otago (Dunedin, NZ) where Professor Campbell is Director of the Bioethics Research Centre. Dr Gillett is a Senior Lecturer in Ethics and part-time Consultant Neurosurgeon. Dr Gareth Jones is Professor of Anatomy and Director of the Neurosciences Research Centre at the University. Despite the multi-authorship, the style of the book hangs together very well and there are no major stylistic differences from chapter to chapter. This gives the book a coherence which other multi-authored volumes sometimes fail to achieve and the authors are to be congratulated on this.

In conclusion one would have to judge this to be one of the best books of its type thus far published. It is a volume medical students, junior house staff and indeed any health professional should read whether or not they have an interest in medical ethics. I believe also that members of hospital ethics committees and non-medical professionals who are involved in ethics teaching - eg philosophers and lawyers - could read the book with profit.

David Richmond is Professor of Geriatric Medicine at the North Shore Hospital, Auckland