The Informal Curriculum: Ethics in General Practice

Dr Nancy Sturman
Professors Mieke van Driel and Malcolm Parker

Acknowledgments:
Centre for Medical Education, Research and Scholarship
The University of Queensland
The Literature

- Student learning on clinical attachments
  - The “underbelly” of medical practice
  - Exposure to role models
- Student perceptions
  - Ethical lapses, Mixed messages
  - Hospital-based
The Study: The GP experience

• Semi-structured individual interviews with 13 key GP Teachers from 13 different teaching practices; audio-recording and transcription; inductive thematic analysis

• “Common and/or serious ethical issues” encountered in clinical practice
Findings

“Our work life is so bound up with ethical choices” (GP10)
Major themes

- GP-patient relationships
- Truth and Truth-telling
- Inter-professional Tensions
- The Ethically Grey
- Personal Impact of ethical decision-making
Negotiating GP-Patient relationships

Special Patients

Particularly demanding patients

Particularly likeable patients

Practice staff and colleagues as patients
Boundaries: Not black and white?

“Knowing how much of yourself you should disclose . . . or things like gifts and those sorts of things can be quite difficult; sometimes you don’t know what to do or say, and again I think very clear people would say ‘oh this is what you should do’ or ‘you shouldn’t accept these gifts, you shouldn’t’ but I think it can become quite grey” (GP1)
Preserving the Therapeutic relationship

May justify uncomfortable decisions
The therapeutic relationship

“So do we just run off this whole list of tests that the naturopath has recommended in order to preserve the patient relationship? You know, ‘No’ is my answer but I say that as if it’s definite, and it’s not, because often I will order tests that I don’t think are necessarily required but the patient really wants them, so I guess it’s a matter of judgement and I try to walk a middle path” (GP10)
Truth and Truth-telling

• By the patient
  “giving the patient the benefit of the doubt”

• By the doctor
Compelling Patient Need

“You know, fudging things to get Medicare rebates for um, not necessarily fudging but they don’t quite fit but you think they, and you say they’ve got such and such, and you might actually be breaking the law and yet we’re actually acting for our patients and in a way they have a genuine disease, they need it, they couldn’t afford it privately . . . Who are we acting for, the patient or the system?” (GP8)
Inter-professional Tensions

Conflicting clinical judgements
Clinical judgement

“because you know the powerful medical player in her mind was the specialist and in fact my attempts to persuade her . . . simply undermined in her eyes my competence as a doctor” (GP10)
Personal impact of ethical decision-making
Denying Patients

“I personally think the dental health care plan should be based solely on whether you have dental needs and nothing else; and I do sometimes feel irritated at being put in the position of being the one who has to tell someone that the rule doesn’t apply to them. . . . none of us really like denying patients things they want, and um could probably justify morally” (GP12)
Consultation Pressures

“It takes longer, a lot longer, to talk and convince them rather than just say ‘here you go’ and get them out the door, and you can earn money . . . it’s easiest to say ‘OK have it this time’” (GP 8)
It is possible that students perceive mixed messages and even ethical lapses in contexts which GP teachers find challenging or ethically “grey”
Tools for Teachers and Students

- a nuanced understanding of ethical issues in real world general practice
- communication skills of negotiation and compromise
- self-awareness and personal resilience
- willingness to reflect and consult
Doing the right thing

“\ I think, I think I’d say all of us want to do the right thing, but it’s sort of surfacing out of the business of the day, and the pressures within the consultation, so the time pressures and the you know your own emotional stuff, it’s surfacing up out of that to think clearly” (GP10)
The Informal Curriculum: Ethics in General Practice

Dr Nancy Sturman

Professors Mieke van Driel and Malcolm Parker

Acknowledgments:
Centre for Medical Education, Research and Scholarship
The University of Queensland