

Ethical Issues in the Practice for Nurses and Midwives

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The ethical aspects of the health professions have been important at least for the last 2000 years, but it is only in the last couple of decades that there has arisen a special stimulus for the discussion of ethical issues among us, spearheaded by such organisations as the Council of Europe, UNESCO and similar bodies who have seen fit to set up specific committees for the purpose of looking into the various aspects of ethical practice.

One reason why the need for discussion of ethical issues has become so urgent relate to the expanding spectrum of activities in medicine and related disciplines. At no time in the history of health professions has there been such a upsurge of interest in issues relating to decisions to be taken, particularly at the beginning and end of life, issues such as in vitro fertilisation, abortion, cloning, stem cell research, euthanasia, and so on. With every advance in these and related areas there arise a whole range of ethical questions which have to be answered satisfactorily.

In Malta we have been doing our bit to provide a venue for dissemination of information and encourage discussion. The Bioethics Consultative Committee was originally set up just over 10 years ago, and since then we have been trying to bring to the public, as well as more specifically to health professionals, the need to tackle ethical issues.

So what is this Bioethics Consultative Committee? It is set up by the Minister responsible for Health on year by year basis. On this Committee we find persons with relevant qualifications in medicine, nursing, law, education, as well as ethicists, who are all interested in ethical issues. We meet at regular intervals, normally on the last Tuesday

of each month, and there we discuss issues which have been brought before the Committee either by the members themselves, or by Government officials or other individuals. Some of the issues that we have been biting on recently include: the use of the morning after pill, the need for informed consent before taking samples for testing patients for hepatitis or AIDS, the ethical standing of genetic testing, and so on.

One important function of the Committee is to organise meetings such as this one. Over the past five years we have had meetings every year. The proceedings of these meetings are published and are available to interested individuals and in libraries. We believe that in this way we are producing a cumulative body of knowledge which could be, or rather should be of interest to many health professionals. The topics for these conferences over the last three years were:

- *Patients Rights, Reproductive Technology and Transplantation* (2000)
- *Inter-professional Ethics in Health Care* (2001)
- *Bioethical Issues at the Beginning and End of Life* (2002).

We also issue a Newsletter at regular interval, which can be accessed at our website on the Synapse (www.synapse.net/bioethics).

It is also of considerable satisfaction to see the Bioethics Committee working closely with other bodies to discuss ethical issues. In this particular case the Institute of Health Care has been mostly responsible for setting up this conference. In about a week's time we are having another conference in association with the College of Family Doctors and Pharmacists to discuss issues relevant to these professions. I think this co-operation is essential, not only in providing the help necessary to the Bioethics Committee to perform its work, but particularly because it emphasises the commitment of these organisations for bioethical issues. We have to convince our colleagues, particularly those who are not here today, that these issues which are being discussed are at the very basis of our profession, that they affect everybody, and that we can ignore ethical principles in our practice only at our own risk.

I wish to thank all those who have been so active in participating and preparing for this conference, and particularly, Dr Sandra Buttigieg, Mrs Grace Jaccarini, Mr Andrew Galea, and his team, as well as Ms Salvina Bonanno and Ms Therese Bugeja, also members of the Bioethics Consultative Committee.