

Ethics in Health, in Search of Collective Well-being

Ética na Saúde, Em Busca do Bem-estar Coletivo
Ética de la Salud, en Busca del Bienestar Colectivo

RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo é destacar o papel da ética na saúde como um princípio e valor fundamental da humanização no atendimento, promovendo relações baseadas na confiança, respeito e responsabilidade, e reforçando, assim, o valor do bem coletivo nas práticas de saúde. Ao alinhar-se com os princípios de beneficência, autonomia, não maleficência e justiça, a ética em saúde torna-se um guia para decisões e práticas, garantindo integridade, equidade e transparência no cuidado oferecido. A análise crítica proposta busca adaptar esses princípios diante dos avanços tecnológicos e dos dilemas éticos contemporâneos, mas também garante que as decisões mantenham um equilíbrio entre justo e harmonioso, ressaltando que o compromisso ético é essencial para a cooperação entre pacientes e a coesão social.

DESCRIPTORES: Ética, Bem-Estar Social, Saúde Pública, Humanização da Assistência.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to highlight the role of ethics in health as a fundamental principle and value of humanization in care, promoting relationships based on trust, respect and responsibility, and thus reinforcing the value of the collective good in health practices. By aligning itself with the principles of beneficence, autonomy, non-maleficence and justice, ethics in health becomes a guide for decisions and practices, ensuring integrity, equity and transparency in the care provided. The proposed critical analysis seeks to adapt these principles in the face of technological advances and contemporary ethical dilemmas, but also ensures that decisions maintain a balance between fair and harmonious, emphasizing that ethical commitment is essential for cooperation between patients and social cohesion.

DESCRIPTORS: Ethics, Social Welfare, Public Health, Humanization of Care.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es destacar el papel de la ética en la salud como un principio y valor fundamental de la humanización en la atención, promoviendo relaciones basadas en la confianza, el respeto y la responsabilidad, y reforzando así el valor del bien colectivo en las prácticas de salud. Al alinearse con los principios de beneficencia, autonomía, no maleficencia y justicia, la ética en salud se convierte en una guía para decisiones y prácticas, garantizando integridad, equidad y transparencia en el cuidado ofrecido. El análisis crítico propuesto busca adaptar estos principios frente a los avances tecnológicos y los dilemas éticos contemporáneos, pero también asegura que las decisiones mantengan un equilibrio entre lo justo y lo armonioso, destacando que el compromiso ético es esencial para la cooperación entre pacientes y la cohesión social.

DESCRIPTORES: Ética, Bienestar Social, Salud Pública, Humanización de la Atención.

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INTRODUCTION

Health ethics emerges as an essential element for professional practice¹, configured as a set of principles and values that guide the performance of professionals with the aim of providing well-being, respecting the dignity and rights of patients.² In this sense, ethics is not limited to obeying codes of conduct; it proposes a critical reflection on everyday health practice, based on principles such as beneficence, autonomy, non-maleficence and justice, which represent the basis of any ethical action in the health field.³

Professionals need to recognize that their actions must be anchored in the health needs and problems of the community, far from technical, medicalized and institutionalized solutions, which often disregard the complexity of the human being.⁴ Thus, ethical action, based on the strengthening of emotional bonds, love and problematizing dialogue, translates into a search for social justice.⁵ An analysis that provides a new perspective on ethics in contemporary health, which is still tied to codes of ethics and the valorization of a biological model centered on disease and technique.⁶

Integrity in practices is supported by ethics, which ensures that the actions of health professionals are guided by honesty, transparency and respect for patients' rights.⁷ Ethics must be recognized as a fundamental component of the training and development of professionals, preventing interventions from becoming merely technical and dehumanized, and being essential

to ensure that practices are humanized and patient-centered.⁸ Failure to consider a solid ethical basis can compromise the quality of care and the integrity of professionals.⁹ Furthermore, ethics acts as a guiding principle that maintains the focus on patient dignity and the reliability of professionals, which are fundamental elements for the effectiveness of the public health system.²

Public trust in health systems is directly proportional to how ethical principles are incorporated and applied in care.¹⁰ The ethical commitments of public health policies and professionals play a fundamental role in creating a relationship of trust, which is essential for the adhesion and cooperation of the community.¹¹ When ethics are observed and applied consistently, the health service becomes a safe space where patients feel respected and valued, creating an environment conducive to building solid relationships between health institutions and society.¹²

In times of health crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, services face decisions that affect individuals and the community. Ethics are central to ensuring that the system operates in a fair manner, balancing individual rights and collective needs.¹³ In times of health crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, services face decisions that affect individuals and the community. Ethics are central to ensuring that the system operates in a fair manner, balancing individual rights and collective needs.¹³

The principles of justice and equity therefore become critical, as public health policies often need to balance the collec-

tive good with the individual right to liberty.^{13,14} Such dilemmas highlight the importance of an ethics that considers both individual freedoms and collective needs, highlighting the essential role of health professionals as guardians of public health.^{13,14}

Thus, ethics in health care must be used as an indispensable practical tool to ensure moral justice, respect and trust in the system.³ Ultimately, ethics establish a solid foundation for implementing responsible and humane care practices, contributing to a more ethical and equitable health system.¹² This study seeks to highlight ethics in health as a fundamental principle and value in the humanization of care, promoting relationships based on trust, respect and responsibility, reaffirming the relevance of the collective good in health practices.

ETHICS AND THE DUTY OF CARE

The bioethical principles of beneficence, autonomy, nonmaleficence, and justice are central to healthcare practice, providing fundamental guidelines for critical decision-making. Beneficence represents the obligation of healthcare professionals to promote the well-being of patients, with their actions aimed at the patient's best interests. This principle is underpinned by utilitarian ethics, which aims to maximize benefits and minimize harms, as outlined by Beauchamp and Childress.⁵ The principle of nonmaleficence requires that professionals avoid causing harm, thus reflecting the Hippocratic maxim of "first,

do no harm".¹⁵ The interaction between these principles creates a delicate balance between the action of doing good and abstinence from causing harm.³

Autonomy gives the patient the right to make decisions about his or her own treatment, a concept that resonates with Kantian philosophy that values individual dignity and freedom.¹⁶ This principle implies that health professionals must respect patients' informed choices, ensuring understanding of the service options available.

Furthermore, the principle of justice requires that medical care be distributed equitably, ensuring equal access to health resources for all individuals, regardless of social class, ethnicity or other discriminatory factors.¹⁷ This principle aims to correct existing inequalities in health care, promoting social justice and equal opportunities in access to treatment.¹⁶

Ethics is a fundamental pillar in health-care practice, guiding the duty of care, which is the ethical responsibility of professionals to act in the interests of patients.¹⁸ The concept of duty of care is closely linked to the principle of beneficence, which demands proactive actions aimed at the patient's well-being.⁵ In this context, the health professional is like a person who must exercise moral discernment and responsibility when providing care.

Furthermore, ethics in duty of care involves a commitment to human dignity. This duty goes beyond the provision of medical treatments and encompasses a holistic approach that considers the emotional, social, spiritual and psychological aspects of care.^{19,20} Ethics provide the necessary framework for decisions in situations involving conflicts of interest or ethical dilemmas, such as in the allocation of limited resources, where the principle of justice becomes particularly significant.¹⁸

The relationship between patient and healthcare professional is fundamentally ethical in nature, involving trust, respect and effective communication. Ethics in the therapeutic relationship is based on the patient's autonomy, which must be respected through shared decisions. In this approach, the patient is given the freedom to choose

between service options based on complete and understandable information. The trust established between these parties is an essential foundation, built through transparency, empathy and the assurance that decisions are made with the patient's interests in mind.²¹

Philosophically, this relationship can be analyzed from the perspective of the social contract, as proposed by philosophers such as Rawls¹⁷, which advocates that health practices should be based on principles of equity and mutual respect. In this way, by complying with ethical principles, health professionals act in accordance with their obligations and contribute to the cultivation of an environment of trust that improves adherence to treatment and clinical outcomes. Thus, ethics emerges as an essential principle in the search for a health care practice that promotes the user's comprehensiveness.¹

ETHICS AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Ethics in public health emerges as a fundamental principle, especially with regard to the delicate balance between individual rights and the collective good. Ethical decisions in this context safeguard general health.²²

The ethics of collective responsibility requires a thorough reflection on how individual actions impact public health in a globalized world. It is imperative that public health interventions consider both the protection of the population and the respect of individual autonomy.²²

In line with the above, another critical aspect that ethics in health care faces is the management of limited resources, such as the allocation of hospital beds and access to high-cost medicines.²³ In relation to expensive treatments, such as those aimed at rare diseases, social justice and equity in access become central dilemmas, resorting, in numerous cases, to the judicialization of health²³, in order to prevent such technologies from remaining restricted to a privileged elite.¹⁷

With the increasing digitalization of health data, new ethical challenges arise,

particularly regarding the privacy and confidentiality of patient information. The principle of confidentiality, fundamental to ethical medical practice, establishes that patient information must be kept confidential unless expressly authorized. Digitalization introduces additional vulnerabilities, as sensitive data is at risk of being accessed, shared or leaked without proper authorization.²²

The adoption of big data systems to analyze health trends also raises questions about the handling and access to this information. The central concern lies in how to ensure privacy in a scenario where data is frequently shared between different platforms and service providers. In addition, the possible application of surveillance technologies such as health monitoring devices may infringe on patients' rights, compromising their autonomy.²⁵ Therefore, ethics in the protection of health data must seek a balance that takes into account the use of data for the benefit of the collective.

Medical research and innovation, including clinical trials, genetic engineering and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for diagnostics, present significant ethical dilemmas. In the context of clinical trials, one of the main challenges is ensuring that participants are fully informed and that the principle of autonomy is strictly respected. The concept of informed consent requires that patients understand the risks and benefits of experimental treatments, raising questions about the actual capacity of patients to understand in complex clinical scenarios.⁵

Genetic manipulation, especially with embryos, raises discussions about the limits of human intervention in nature, the potential for inequalities in access to these technologies and the risk of using these innovations for eugenic purposes.²⁶ The use of AI for diagnostics further complicates the ethical landscape, introducing questions about accountability and transparency. While AI systems can provide faster and more accurate diagnoses, the opacity of the algorithms raises concerns about the implications of errors or mistakes.²⁵

Thus, ethics in health must be seen as

a field of study, and, above all, as a fundamental imperative that demands a critical and continuous discussion on how to face the complex challenges that affect the collective good.

ETHICS AND DILEMMAS IN PRACTICE

Ethical dilemmas frequently arise in clinical practice, challenging healthcare professionals to balance fundamental principles. One common one occurs when a patient's desire to discontinue treatment clashes with the perspective of the professional who believes that such a decision could be detrimental to the patient's health. In this scenario, professionals face the complex challenge of respecting the patient's autonomy while striving to ensure their well-being. Kantian ethical philosophy provides a solid basis for decision-making in this context, emphasizing the importance of respecting the dignity and autonomy of individuals.²⁷

The principle of beneficence, which imposes an obligation to act in the best interest of the patient, can intensify conflict in situations where life-or-death decisions must be made. Bioethics, as articulated by Beauchamp and Childress⁵, suggests that such decisions should be made considering bioethics and the patient's well-being, thus preserving the fundamental relationship of trust between patient and professional.

An ethical work environment is necessary for professionals to act with integrity. Research indicates that environments that respect ethical principles, such as professional autonomy and the promotion of a culture of empathy, are correlated with higher quality of care and better patient outcomes. Professionals who feel they can practice according to ethical values tend to have a lower incidence of burnout and emotional exhaustion, contributing to their mental health and overall performance.²⁸

John Rawls¹⁷, in his analysis of justice and equity, he postulates that these principles are fundamental to any organizational structure that seeks to be ethical, including hospital and health care environments. A

workplace that values and respects professionals promotes motivation and responsiveness, positively reflecting on the quality

“ In emergency care, professionals often face ethical dilemmas in situations that require rapid decision-making that can have significant consequences for patients' lives. ”

of care provided.

In multi-casualty scenarios, professionals often need to prioritize care based on triage criteria, which can engender a utilitarian approach. While this approach seeks to maximize the benefit to the community, it can confront professionals with moral dilemmas when deciding who receives priority care, challenging their own personal values and beliefs.²³

In pediatrics, ethical dilemmas are even more complex, given the imperative of protecting the interests of patients who lack full decision-making capacity. Disagreement between parents and health care professionals about what constitutes the best treatment, especially in cases of serious illness, requires professionals to balance the principle of beneficence with respect for the wishes of the parents and the needs of the patient. This dynamic is closely analyzed by clinical ethics.²⁹

In palliative care, the emphasis shifts from healing to providing comfort, which can conflict with the principle of nonmaleficence, especially when considering the administration of sedatives that may ultimately hasten the patient's death. Aristotelian philosophy, in its pursuit of the concept of the “middle,” can provide valuable guidance in this context. Here, the practitioner seeks to balance compassionate care with prudence, ensuring that decisions are guided by the virtue of compassion and respect for the patient, with a view to the quality of care.¹ In short, the ethical challenges in user assistance are intrinsic to clinical practice and demand a continuous process of humanization.

ETHICS AND HUMANIZED CARE

Ethics of care is a fundamental principle in healthcare, and is crucial to creating an environment of trust and humanization that promotes the integral well-being of patients. Trust is built on essential ethical values, such as honesty, respect and responsibility, which are essential for a welcoming and personalized care experience.⁵

Immanuel Kant's ethical philosophy

²⁷ emphasizes the importance of treating the patient as an end in itself.

“ This principle underpins the need to respect the autonomy and dignity of the individual, promoting care that transcends the mere relief of physical suffering to encompass the emotional and spiritual dimensions of care. ”

When the practice of care is based on humanization and focused on the needs of the patient, the health professional not only addresses the pathological aspects, but also provides comprehensive support.

Emmanuel Levinas ³⁰ In its ethical approach, it emphasizes responsibility towards the "other", reinforcing the view of the patient as a complete human being, who deserves attention, compassion and empathy. This perspective establishes a solid basis for the efficiency

of health services, contributing to strengthening trust and improving the bond between professionals and patients.

Ethics applied consistently in health practices is vital to establishing relationships of respect and trust with society. The importance of ethical guidelines in clinical research and medical trials is highlighted, as they ensure that the interests and safety of participants are prioritized, increasing public confidence in technological innovations and new treatments. ²³ Health services that implement policies of transparency and fair treatment, especially in resource allocation practices and accessibility to treatments, demonstrate an ethical commitment to the collective, reducing distrust and increasing credibility. ³¹

The implementation of palliative care programs and mental health services that prioritize patient dignity and respect exemplifies how ethics strengthens the bond between the institution and its users. These practices demonstrate concern for the holistic well-being of the patient, going beyond the treatment of illnesses. ⁵

Transparency and accountability are essential pillars for ethical decision-making in healthcare. ³² Transparency involves the honest disclosure of information about risks, benefits and treatment alternatives, allowing the patient to make informed choices, strengthening the principle of autonomy. ¹⁷ In the context of health policies, transparency is equally crucial for the population to understand the motivations behind decisions such as resource allocation and quarantine measures. ¹⁷

The ethics of responsibility, as proposed by Hans Jonas, emphasizes that decisions in medicine that may impact people's lives and well-being must be made with caution and consideration. ³³ Adopting an ethical stance that prioritizes these aspects demonstrates that healthcare institutions and professionals respect the right of patients to be fully informed and to actively participate in deliberations about their health condi-

tions. Ethical responsibility strengthens the commitment to the collective, overcoming the individualism that benefits only a few, and reveals a genuine commitment to improving healthcare services. ¹⁷

Ethics of care is an essential component in health care, promoting a practice that recognizes the dignity of the patient and the importance of a relationship of trust. ³³ Respect for autonomy, transparency in information and ethical responsibility are pillars that support this approach, ensuring that care is not limited to clinical aspects, but encompasses the entire human being.

CONCLUSION

For ethical practice with a view to collective well-being, some suggestions can be adopted: firstly, continuing ethics training for health professionals should enable them to deal with complex dilemmas and to reflect on the ethical impacts of their decisions. Ethics should not be treated as a static subject, but as a living practice integrated into professional training. Secondly, encouraging transparency and accountability in health institutions strengthens public trust. Finally, it is essential to promote policies that prioritize equity in access to health services, especially in relation to limited resources.

Following the principles of justice, it is possible to develop distribution criteria that minimize inequalities and ensure that everyone receives care according to their needs.

Thus, ethical practice in healthcare goes beyond standards and protocols; it involves a deep commitment to human care in its entirety. Ethics, when applied correctly, becomes a tool for improving services and humanizing healthcare services.

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