

Chapter VIII

CONCEPTS OF HEALTH AND DILEMMAS OF MEDICAL CARE

The Basic Concepts of Health

We shall open this chapter by noting the various concepts of Health and then pass on to the problems of ethics in a pluralistic society, and finally we shall consider some of the moral dilemmas in medical care.

There can be various concepts of health. Some of them may be noted as under.

(a) Biomedical concept : Health has been traditionally defined as 'absence of disease' and disease as deviation from a biochemical norm. This is to how the clinician understands health. This concept of physical health is based on the germ theory of disease. But this alone is found inadequate in solving some of the major health problems of mankind such as, the population problem, accidents, mental illness, drug abuse, etc.

(b) Ecological Concept : Ecologists have viewed the health as a state of balance between man and his environment and is a pre-requisite of self-fulfilment. This state is not static, but must be re-established continuously as man interacts with his environment. Along with this goes a continuous mutual adaptation.

(c) Biosocial and Biocultural concept : As the social sciences are developing it is revealed that disease is both a biological and a social phenomenon. There are social, cultural and psychological factors which must be taken into consideration in defining health.

Mental and Social Health

Often a distinction is made between mental and social health.

Mental and physical health are closely related since one affects the other and in condition like hypertension, peptic ulcer, psychological factors play a significant role.

(d) Holistic concept : This is a synthesis of all the above concepts and corresponds to the view held by the ancients that 'health implies a sound mind, in a sound body in a sound family in sound environment'. It is the intangible, something that transcends physiology and psychology. This is the error of our day that physicians separate the body from the soul.

Nowadays a fourth dimension has been suggested viz. spiritual health along with three components of health viz. physical, mental and social.

The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of

health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition".

Problems of Ethics in a Pluralistic Society

India is a pluralistic society in the sense that various cultural groups and a host of religious communities and beliefs contribute to the richness of her population. Hence the question could be asked about the problems of ethics in a pluralistic society.

Ethics govern human behaviour and human relationships, with rights, responsibilities and duties. Obviously this will be inextricably bound with morality.

The basis for ethical codes derive from and are conditioned by philosophical ideas on values, sets of professional norms, the laws of the land, and of course the religion of individuals, groups and society.

Ethical problems arise in a pluralistic societies and cultures, when there is a conflict of overriding ethics. Thus laws may be formulated wherein some acts may be permitted or encouraged, but the same act is not permitted by a particular group.

In a pluralistic society one must pay attention to all religious beliefs and permit their acceptance particularly in humanitarian matters, especially life and death. In so doing one should show respect to all citizens of diverse religious beliefs and cultures.

All these codes are directed towards protecting all citizens who are brothers and sisters and therefore bound by a wide social ethic. Believers indicate that the social ethic where all members are brothers, derives from the fact that they are all children of God.

Some Moral dilemmas in medical care

Is there an ethical imperative to preserve all patients in life including those who are unable to communicate with others, for whom existence seems only a fiction? Our training is to preserve life and functions whenever possible. We are not trained to decide who 'is better off dead'. The patient who is alive has an overriding right to life and deserves the maximal possible therapy.

Western ethical traditions have reached some general agreement that it is necessary to use 'ordinary' but not 'extraordinary' means to support and comfort patients in such cases. By 'ordinary' means is meant 'all medications, treatment and operations which offer a reasonable hope of benefit for the

patient and which can be obtained and used without excessive expenses, pain or other inconvenience'. 'Extraordinary means are those who do not offer such hope or cannot be obtained or use without those kinds of liabilities'. There is a professional and moral relationship entered into with each patient admitted for intensive care in which it is understood that the patient will receive appropriate care. Such care cannot be terminated later on the grounds that another patient with a higher potential for survival needs intensive care without violating the original obligation to the admitted patient and without violating the ethical principle that we cannot aid some by harming other.

The Baha's writings state that the prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity. We have already noted that Pali Buddhist texts refer to the Buddha as the physician who only can cure or heal men struck by the sickness of mundane existence.