Medical Ethics
For Radiography Students

Instruction in medical ethics has been a part of the curriculum guide for radiography programs for several years, yet many educators seem to be unsure how to construct an ethics course or how to teach ethics. Educators must make the content understandable and useful and convey the intent of ultimately helping the professional radiographer to become proficient in ethical decision making while understanding and abiding by the ASRT Code of Ethics.

To design and teach an ethics course, an educator should examine exactly what should be conveyed to the student. Many may, at first, rationalize that an ethics course must help the student develop the caring, helping attitude so vital to health care practitioners. Steves[1] suggests that many instructors are not stressing skills that permit students to develop into practitioners who are sensitive to the patient. Steves also believes that it is the responsibility of the educator to prepare students for both the technical and caring aspects of being a practitioner of the discipline studied.

Patterson and Vitello[2] discuss societal trends that have resulted in a renewed emphasis on the study of ethics. They further state that society is asking for greater accountability from all professions. Health care, including radiography, is not excluded. It is the responsibility of the radiologic science educator to design and instruct an ethics course that meets the needs of both students and society.

It first is imperative that a course in ethics for radiologic technology students contain some medical law material. In fact, courses typically are called "Medical Ethics and Law" based on JRCERT requirements. The day-to-day ethical problems faced by the practitioner have as high a percentage of legal consequences as ethical ones. Problems related to negligence, informed consent, malpractice and child abuse are ethical as well as legal issues.

Dowd[3] explains why students should study medical law in his statement: "Radiographers must have a basic knowledge of medical law in today's health care environment. Today, radiographers are recognized as health care professionals. There is an increased responsibility that goes along with this recognition. Today's patients are customers and expect high levels of service. In past years, physicians and/or the hospital were responsible for the care they delivered."

Dowd also explains that data from the national database of medical malpractice filing shows a trend, during the past several years, toward radiographers being held legally liable in lawsuits related to radiography.[2]

An attorney who also is a radiologic technologist (a J.D., R.T.) is possibly the best source for legal issues that impact the health care delivery of radiological services. Another possible source of information on the ethical/legal issues within radiology may be the legal staff of any medium to large teaching hospital. While not as knowledgeable about radiography as the J.D. who is a registered technologist, these attorneys specialize in health care law.

Any ethics course should be constructed around certain core subject matter.

First, the course should contain an expanded area of terminology. The definition of the term "ethics" and all associated terminology (i.e., morals, mores, values, rights, privileges, etc.) should be explored. Students must understand all terminology used to adequately comprehend basic ethical concepts.

Within this area, the instructor may include lecture material on how members of society derive the values affecting ethical decisions. Although other people play an important part in shaping our values, they do so in the context of the roles they play in different areas. These areas have been termed "value sources"; four of which have been identified by Guy[4] as:

- ***Experience.*** Experiences in life such as love, marriage, birth, death and work all shape our values according to events, positive or negative, occurring within these experiences.

• ***Culture.*** Our culture, ethnicity or the environment in which we were raised or in which we live promotes derivation of values by creating within us ideas of what is acceptable and what is not.

• ***Science.*** Science, which we generally rely on as being factual, shapes our values by providing "truths" that cause us to value or devalue certain aspects of existence.

• ***Religion.*** The presence or absence of religion teaches us either to believe in the reward and punishment system of right and wrong or that there is no eternal payment for our actions.

Although we essentially derive our values from these four areas, there are certain core values necessary for functioning in society today, 10 of which also have been identified by Guy[4] and are listed in Table 1 along with a brief description of each.

The historical aspects of ethics and the theorists who dedicated their lives to the study of ethics is another subject area that should be included in an ethics course. An examination of this area provides the student with a foundation upon which to build. Imperative to any historical ethics component within the course is the need to explore consequential (teleological) and nonconsequential (deontological) ethical theories.

Teleological theories are goal-based theories that focus on the outcome that produces the most good for those involved. In health care, this theory can be used to promote, among other things, euthanasia. It is conceivable, under teleology, that the end of life for a terminally ill individual who is suffering and causing emotional and financial strain for the family is good; the end thus justifying the means.

On the other hand, deontological, duty-based theories probably would prohibit euthanasia because health care providers, especially physicians, are duty-bound to protect life.

The types of consequential theories — egoism and utilitarianism — should be studied as to their meaning and role in moral decision making. Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative, W. D. Ross' Prima Facie Duties and John Rawl's Maximum Principle of Justice should be stressed under nonconsequential theories.

Table 1
Core Values[4]

Core Value	Description
Caring	Thoughtful, attentive and scrupulous
Honesty	Truthful, straightforward and trustworthy
Accountability	Responsible and obligated
Promise keeping	Keeping of commitments
Pursuit of excellence	Motivated to strive toward being the best that one can be
Loyalty	Faithfulness and allegiance
Fairness	Open-minded and avoidance of favoritism
Integrity	Avoidance of conflicts and resistance of pressure
Respect for others	The ability to recognize everyone's right to privacy and self-determination
Responsible citizenship	Acting in regard to societal values

And since religion serves as a source of values and guides ethical decisions for many professionals, Saint Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law Ethics and the Roman Catholic Interpretation should be mentioned. Each of these theories may then be applied to health care and professional ethical decision making.

The instructor also needs to define the types of ethical problems likely to require the attention of the student and professional radiographer. To date, four problem types have been identified:[4]

- Ethical dilemmas.
- Ethical dilemmas of justice.
- Ethical distress.
- Locus of authority issues.

Any discussion of these problem areas must include their application to health care delivery. For example, the reporting of suspected child abuse by the radiographer is a locus of authority issue because it involves reporting the suspicion to the proper authorities.

Several authors have suggested models for ethical decision making. Educators should examine several ethics texts, rather than relying on a sole source, to determine which one works best. Educators should provide students with a general outline for solving complex problems and a simple step-by-step process for making ethical decisions.

Dowd,[3] Guy,[4] Golden[5] and Purtilo[6] all have recommended noteworthy step-by-step processes for ethical decision making, as shown in Table 2. Although each of these ethicists differ slightly in the decision-making process, two steps are included in each: assessing, sensing, gathering and defining the problem; and analyzing, reviewing, completing and implementing the course of action. Thus, the first step to solving an ethical problem is determining the type of problem encountered and the last step is making a decision and implementing it based upon the collection and analysis of the information in between.

Whether educators use one of the outlines presented in Table 2 or formulate their own, they should be careful to use one set of guidelines. This helps alleviate any confusion that may be promoted by using several different methods, while also allowing the students the opportunity to work on solving problems using the same method.

Educators also should explain the ASRT Code of Ethics fully within the context of the ethics course. Each of the 10 ethical principles in the code should be dissected to determine the meaning and application to professional practice of each principle.

For example, the code's third principle states, "The radiologic technologist delivers patient care and service unrestricted by the concerns of personal attributes or the nature of the disease or illness, and without discrimination regardless of sex, race, creed, religion or socioeconomic status." Upon dissection, this principle serves to guide the duty of the technologist to perform the requirements of the profession without bias in any form. It admonishes the professional to put aside any personal feelings regarding anyone or anything when performing the duties and services inherent to the profession.

Those duties and services are described elsewhere within the code and in the Scope of Practice for Radiographers. The principles of

conduct relate to one another and to the scope of practice, which then relates back to the curriculum. Ethics, like other radiography courses, is part of an overall educational plan for the professional radiographer.

Finally, the educator should invent and/or compile ethical case studies likely to be encountered in professional practice and then allow students the opportunity to solve the problems. This will provide background information necessary to aid them in adhering to the ASRT Code of Ethics and in solving problems related to ethics throughout their professional careers. Interactive computer programs for instructional purposes also may be used by the instructor to promote student learning and problem-solving exercises.

The content areas described here and shown in the basic course outline offered in Table 3 in no way constitute everything that should be addressed in an ethics course for radiography students. They do, however, represent critical areas of inclusion. The instructor ultimately will develop an ethics course that provides meaningful information. Reaching this point is a challenge, but it is one that every educator can meet.

References

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