Chapter 5: Ethics

Objectives

- Define ethics and bioethics
- Distinguish between professional, legal, and moral accountability
- Outline strategies to resolve ethical conflicts
- Describe the role of ethical tests
- Discuss prehospital ethical issues
- Identify specific ethical dilemmas

Scenario

You are at your station, 2 weeks into your first paramedic job, when you notice a paramedic from another crew looking through the patient reports. He says he just wants to check out a call that your crew ran on his ex-wife.
Discussion

- What legal/ethical issues does this situation present?
- Would the nature of the call influence your thoughts?
- Are there any strategies that you can use to help you determine the best approach to take in this situation?

Terminology

- Ethics
  - Standard for honorable behavior
- Morals
  - Social standards/customs
- Unethical
  - Fails to conform to moral principles, values, standards

Codes of Ethics

- Professional
  - EMT Code of Ethics
  - AMA's Principles of Medical Ethics
Personal Accountability

- Professional
  - Standards
- Legal
  - Often overlaps with ethical
- Moral
  - Emotion not reliable
  - Rational decision making useful
  - Can’t base decisions only on others’ opinions
  - Ethical “rules” can guide behavior

EMS Problems—Rapid Approach

Ethical Tests in Health Care

- What is in the patient’s best interest?
- What does the patient want?
- Balance both
Global Concepts

- Provide patient benefit
- Avoid harm
- Recognize patient’s autonomy

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

- Health care community
  - Establish standards of care
  - Research/treatment protocols
  - Review decisions/educate
- Public
  - Passing laws
  - Public policy
  - Self-determination documents

Contemporary Ethical Issues

- Paramedics will face ethical issues

  These often relate to
  - Right to self-determination (autonomy)
  - Obligation to provide patient care (beneficence)

- Paramedic must answer:
  - What is in the patient’s best interest?
  - What are the patient’s rights?
  - Does the patient understand the issues at hand?
  - What is the paramedic’s professional, legal, and moral accountability?
Allocation of Resources

- Access to health insurance
  - May define which medical services are covered or excluded
- Treatment decisions made when resources are inadequate to meet needs
- When rationing of care is required, it should be based on ethically oriented criteria

Decisions Surrounding Resuscitation

- Available documentation
  - Advance directives
  - Living wills
  - Other self-determination documents
- What does patient want?
- What does family want?

Confidentiality

- A fundamental right to privacy
- Conflict may arise between ethics and confidentiality if public health at stake
Consent

- Patient right to make decisions regarding health care
- Patient refusal of lifesaving care can produce legal and ethical conflicts

Other Ethical Principles

- Care in futile situations
- Obligation to provide care
- Advocacy and accountability
- Role as physician extender

Care in Futile Situations

- An action is considered futile if it serves no purpose or is completely ineffective.
- When emergency care is being provided in situations that may be futile, consult with medical direction.
- It is generally agreed that CPR is futile for patients with obvious signs of death:
  - Decapitation
  - Rigor mortis
  - Tissue decomposition
  - Extreme dependent lividity
Obligation to Provide Care
- Paramedic’s obligation is seldom an issue

Patient Advocacy and Paramedic Accountability
- Educate patients to effect system change
- Base decisions on medical, not financial, considerations
- Inform patients of health care reform initiatives
- Promote patient access to information about state-of-the-art technologies and treatment
- Promote fairness and equality in health care

Role as Physician Extender
- The paramedic must generally follow the orders of the medical director or the director’s designee
Conclusion

As a professional, the paramedic must conform to a standard established by his or her level of training and regional practice. Paramedics must abide by the law when ethical conflicts occur.

Questions?