

The role of the existential-spiritual dimension in clinical ethics consultation

PhD Project
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Background: Clinical health care is increasingly being challenged by ethical questions and problems, spurred by societal pluralism, technological advances, and cultural transformation. These ethical challenges relate to profound values, concepts of the good life, and existential convictions that are rarely addressed in clinical communications. Clinical ethics consultation (CEC) is one of the rare opportunities where this existential dimension may surface and can be investigated scientifically.

Aim: The aim of this PhD project is to describe the role that existential and spiritual issues play in CEC, their contribution to ethical conflicts as well as their contribution in the resolution of these conflicts. A specific focus will be on the question whether a spiritual assessment of the patient can help specify the ethical principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence and thus help finding a goal of care that promotes best the patient's wellbeing.

Methods: This is an empirical ethics study using a variety of methodological approaches. (1) In a retrospective document analysis, the detailed deliberation reports of individual case consultations of the Lausanne University Hospital Clinical Ethics Unit over the past 5 years will be screened and evaluated using qualitative content analysis. (2) In an ethnographic part of the project, ethics case deliberations will be observed by a nonparticipant observer, taking field notes and analyzing audio- or video-recordings of such deliberations. (3) In a controlled experimental setting, medical students in an ethics deliberation course will be divided into a control group and an intervention group using spiritual assessment information, and effects on deliberation process and results will be investigated.

Impact: The results of this research project has implications for CEC as well as for spiritual care in clinical practice. It can also help guide professional education.