



Medical ethics

Understanding the role medical ethics play in healthcare provision is important. Below are four 'pillars' of medical ethics which are a common framework used to describe how doctors consider the best action to take in many situations.

Medical Ethics

- 1 **Beneficence** refers to treating patients and improving their welfare. Doctors need to actively take positive steps for their patients' wellbeing.
- 2 **Non-maleficence** refers to doing no harm to the patient; this includes not inflicting harm and not imposing risks for harm.
- 3 Respect for the **Autonomy** of the patient refers to doctors and healthcare professionals respecting that individuals have the right to choose how to live their own lives. They should enquire about the patient's wishes to make decisions about their healthcare.
- 4 **Justice** refers to the idea that people should be treated fairly (not necessarily equally).

During your work experience consider the relevance of these 'pillars' and record examples of when you witness them being demonstrated.

Example from a work experience participant at a GP practice:

An elderly patient visited the GP because he was experiencing headaches. The patient was taking a number of medications for various ailments. The GP explained to me that she has to consider all the reasons why the patient may be experiencing headaches but also consider that they may be a side effect of a medication. The GP explained that if she thinks one of the medications is causing headaches then she must weigh this up against changing the medications, i.e. (or) such as offering additional medication or stopping a particular prescription but only if it is safe to do so. The GP must always consider 'first do no harm'. The GP must also discuss with the patient the options available so that they can make a shared and informed decision – which is respecting the patient's autonomy.

Examples:

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The RCGP have produced this activity sheet for pupils aged 16-17 who are taking part in work experience in a healthcare setting. These activities have been designed to be discussed in a group setting, to reflect and confirm understanding. Work experience can be in a primary or secondary care setting, it may perhaps be a voluntary opportunity in a care home or even relevant part-time work.

Facilitator notes, further activity sheets and a reflective diary have also been created by the RCGP. Further information can be found at rcgp.org.uk/discovergp.