

Publication

Avoiding bias in medical ethical decision-making : Lessons to be learnt from psychology research

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When ethical decisions have to be taken in critical, complex medical situations, they often involve decisions that set the course for or against life-sustaining treatments. Therefore the decisions have far-reaching consequences for the patients, their relatives, and often for the clinical staff. Although the rich psychology literature provides evidence that reasoning may be affected by undesired influences that may undermine the quality of the decision outcome, not much attention has been given to this phenomenon in health care or ethics consultation. In this paper, we aim to contribute to the sensitization of the problem of systematic reasoning biases by showing how exemplary individual and group biases can affect the quality of decision-making on an individual and group level. We are addressing clinical ethicists as well as clinicians who guide complex decision-making processes of ethical significance. Knowledge regarding exemplary group psychological biases (e.g. conformity bias), and individual biases (e.g. stereotypes), will be taken from the disciplines of social psychology and cognitive decision science and considered in the field of ethical decision-making. Finally we discuss the influence of intuitive versus analytical (systematical) reasoning on the validity of ethical decision-making.

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