BIOETHICS: A VEHICLE FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING BETWEEN DENTAL AND NURSING STUDENTS

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Six years ago, New York University embarked on a unique adventure in professional school education. It created the first partnership between a school of nursing and a school of dentistry. The nursing school is now called the New York University College of Nursing at the College of Dentistry. The idea for the merger originated with the outgoing dean, Terry Fulmer, Dean of the College of Nursing. Upon hearing of her vision, Dr. Michael Alfano, executive vice president of NYU, encouraged the merger saying, “…I was very impressed with synergies, not only academically but in terms of patient care, that would come of this partnership.”

Dean Charles Bertolami, Dean of the College of Dentistry, uses a metaphor to describe the old twentieth century paradigm of dentistry: “A mouth doesn’t walk into a dental office, a person does. The mouth just happens to drag a whole body along with it—and a tremendous opportunity is lost for enhancing overall health when we act as if our responsibility is confined to a disembodied mouth.”

The need to rethink the old paradigm of dental education is underscored by the emphasis placed by the National Institute of Dental Research on the role of dentists in addressing systemic health concerns. Recent trends in healthcare have caused dentistry and medicine to become increasingly focused on total patient well-being and disease prevention. These trends reflect advances in medical technology, public demand, and changes in the delivery of health care. “It is in the best interest and overall health of the patient that these parallel, but separate paths (medicine and dentistry) converge quickly and collaborative health management becomes the norm.” Thus, NYU’s adventure in education may be blazing a 21st century path that other universities will soon follow.
GOALS OF THE MERGER

In creating the merger, the dental and nursing colleges sought to accomplish the following goals:

1. Provide nursing and dental students new and unprecedented clinical opportunities in each other’s specialty.
2. Create research synergy between the two colleges.
3. Expand dentistry’s widely accepted concept of providing preventive care for one organ system—the oral cavity—to providing primary preventive care for all patient organ systems.
4. Teach nursing and dental students to promote the total well-being of the patient.

PRESENT STATE OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE COLLEGES

As presently situated, the two colleges are a mile apart in Manhattan. A new building for the College of Nursing will eventually be located in the heart of NYU’s health-science corridor on First Avenue adjacent to the College of Dentistry. This will facilitate the hoped for interaction between the colleges. At present, however, the two groups of professional students do not interact outside of joint community outreach screening programs. These programs entail screening for oral and systemic disease. Dental students screen persons for cavities and oral cancer, and nursing students screen patients for such systemic diseases as hypertension. Essentially, both groups of professional students are providing parallel healthcare services. There is very little collaborative learning. Thus, such programs, though important in providing diagnostic services to New York City residents, are functioning within the old paradigm of dental and nursing education—separate, specialized health care services within the larger universe of health care. In working toward the goal of total patient well-being, it is important for the dental and nursing colleges to promote such shared intangible doctoring skills as communication, humanism, and compassion. Thus, the author argues that interaction between the colleges should begin now, prior to the physical merger on First Avenue, and bioethics could serve as the first didactic interaction between these two groups of professional students. This assertion is based on the supposition that both professions share the same foundation principles of bioethics: beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for autonomy, and justice. These shared core
principles can serve as a cornerstone for creating an interdisciplinary course between the two colleges.

**PRESENT STATE OF BIOETHICS EDUCATION AT THE COLLEGES**

At present, the College of Dentistry teaches a bioethics curriculum that is mandated by the American Dental Association (ADA). It consists of a four year course on interpreting the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct. The curriculum teaches students conduct that is consistent with the 5 fundamental principles that form the foundation of the ADA Code—patient autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice and veracity.\(^5\) The College of Nursing teaches bioethics in an informal manner consisting of voluntary monthly lunch meetings. At these meetings, the format consists of either the faculty posing clinical ethical dilemmas for students to discuss or students bringing up clinical cases with ethical components that they had encountered in their clinical rotations.

**THE PROPOSED COURSE AND ITS EDUCATIONAL GOALS**

As the proposed course, jointly presented to nursing and dental students, has never been attempted, the course would be an experiment in dental and nursing education as well as being an experiment in ethics education.

With the backing of Dean Bertolami and Dean Andrew Spielman, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the College of Dentistry, the author proposed presenting a bioethics curriculum as an elective course to a small group of eight dental and eight nursing students. The students would be selected based on their motivations for learning the skill of health care team building. The proposed format would entail presenting topics on a weekly basis related to the shared core of bioethics principles. The nursing and dental students would be asked to work in pairs to do assignments based on the weekly topic and then present the assignment to the class in the following week. The class would be divided into two equal sections with four pairs of students in each section. One section would consist of four mixed pairs with one nursing student paired with one dental student. The other section would consist of four pairs with one dental student paired with one dental student and one nursing student paired with one dental student. It is hypothesized that at the end of the course, the mixed pair students will feel more comfortable
collaborating with the other profession’s student than the students who were paired with students from their own profession.

It is hoped that at the completion of the course, the students will have accomplished the following goals:

1. The students will be knowledgeable in the bioethical principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy and justice.

2. The students will become knowledgeable in such topics of bioethics as the Hippocratic and Florence Nightingale Oaths, Nazi medical experimentation, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Karen Quinlan Case, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mills, and organ donation.

3. The students will become proficient in using bioethical principles of conflict resolution, and in using a methodology for resolving ethically difficult clinical cases.

4. The students’ collaborative learning will serve as a foundation for future professional collaboration in providing their respective health care services to society.

These goals will be shared with the students during the first week of the course.

THE FORMAT FOR THE COURSE

Weeks I and II: Professional Oaths

This discussion will focus on the professional oaths—Medicine’s Hippocratic Oath and Nursing’s modified version of the Hippocratic Oath—the Florence Nightingale Oath. Students will be asked to analyze the different section of the oaths—the oath of initiation section and the code section. Students will compare and contrast the positive core principle of the physician acting to benefit the sick against the negative principles that prohibit the physician from giving deadly drugs or abortive remedies to patients and the principle prohibiting physicians from doing surgery. As the Hippocratic Oath advocates for practicing medicine based on the ability and judgment of the physician to do what he thinks is in the patient’s best interests, the Hippocratic Oath is considered to be paternalistic. Accordingly, the students will be asked to examine the ramifications of paternalism and the concomitant secrecy related to the physician withholding relevant decision-making information from the patient. Finally, the students will be asked to analyze the reasons for the dental profession not having a professional
Week III and IV: The History of Bioethics

This discussion will focus on modern day milestone cases in the evolution of bioethics. Such egregious cases, in the breakdown of medical ethics, as the Nazi medical human experiments and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study will be analyzed in terms of their relationships to beneficence, nonmaleficence, and informed consent. The question of how American researchers could believe that the pursuit of scientific knowledge would exempt them from honoring the Hippocratic pledge to keep patients from harm will be analyzed in terms of its relevance to research being conducted in the present and the future—do pressures exist today that could cause researchers to overlook the principle of primum non nocere (first do no harm). The 1970s case of Karen Quinlan, and the right to refuse life support, will be discussed in terms of it leading to physicians having a new respect for a patient’s autonomy in making personal medical decisions. Students will be asked to analyze how these cases led to the American Medical Association’s adoption of the AMA Principles of 1980 and how those events effected the introduction of the concept of rights of patients into the new AMA Code and the evolution of today’s advance directives. The assignment will entail the student pairs being asked to write the advance directive for Karen Quinlan that she might have written prior to her tragic illness. In week IV, the students will be asked to present and discuss the advance directives that they have written for Karen Quinlan.

Week V and VI: The Philosophic Foundations of Bioethics

This discussion will focus on the writings of Immanuel Kant and how his philosophy transformed medicine from providing care based on the consequentialist principle of beneficence to providing care based on principle of the ethic of respect for persons.

Students will be asked to discuss the general problem of whether the action of providing care can be morally wrong even if it produces good consequences. They will also be asked to examine how this rubric of respect for person came to include the principles of fidelity, autonomy, veracity and avoidance of killing. Finally, each student pair will be given separate hypothetical medical-dental clinical cases and be asked to analyze the cases by applying the principles of autonomy and truth telling.
to that case. In week VI, the students will be asked to discuss the cases and how they used the principles of autonomy and truth telling to resolve the ethical issue connected to the case.

**Week VII and VIII: The Need for a Social Ethic for Medicine**

Students will be asked to examine problems that arise based on promoting the welfare of society. The questions of how the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence are applied to society and how medicine must confront the allocation of scarce medical resources will be discussed. Students will be asked to examine John Stuart Mills’ philosophy of social utility, providing the greatest aggregate good, and applying this principle to modern day medicine. Students will be asked to analyze the allocation of a scarce medical resource—organ donation. The assignment will entail the students being given organ donation cases and they will be asked to discuss to whom, amongst a group of possible recipients, a scarce organ should be given. In week VIII, the students will present their cases for discussion and what principles they used to resolve the case.

**Week IX and X: Conflict Resolution and Methodology for Analyzing Clinical Ethical Cases**

Solving moral dilemmas in medicine requires not only identifying the proper principle but also being able to resolve conflicts among those principles. Students will be taught different strategies for resolving conflict among different ethical principles. These strategies include single principle theories, ranking principles, balancing principles, and combining ranking and balancing principles.

Students will then be taught the methodology, proposed by bioethicists Shelton and Orr, used in analyzing clinical cases that present themselves with ethical quandaries. The methodology will be presented to students so that they will learn how to ask the appropriate question that the case presents, provide a narrative related to the medical and social facts surrounding the case, generate an assessment of the case, identify the principles that apply to the case and resolve conflicts between those principles, and finally, make specific recommendations to the health care professionals on how to proceed. The assignment will entail each of the student pairs being given one clinical case that involves an ethical dilemma. In week X the students will present their cases to the class for discussion.
Week XI and XII: Public Policy Issue

A public policy issue will be presented in which the dental students and nursing students may disagree on solving the issue. The issue, a real contemporary issue, will be about providing emergency dental care to a rural population in the state of Alaska not served by the dental profession. The questions that the students will be asked to discuss are: Does a de facto covenant exist between the tax-paying citizens of Alaska and the dental profession obligating the profession to provide emergency care to all citizens? Should nurses be trained to provide emergency dental care in a rural Alaskan town where a nurse is present and the nearest dentist is over 200 miles away? The students will be asked to consider the perspective of the rural town’s residents, the perspective of the nurse who resides in the town, the perspective of an Alaskan dentist, and the perspective of the president of the national American Dental Association. The assignment will entail the student pairs being asked to analyze the Introduction section of the American Dental Association Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct and determine if the Association is honoring the principles it espouses as related to this public policy issue. In week XII, the student pairs will present to the class the results of their analysis of the Introduction section as it relates to this public policy issue.

Week XIII: Student Evaluation of the Course

The students will be asked to evaluate the course as related to the goals outlined to the students in the beginning of the course with specific attention being paid to whether they believe that the use of mixed pairs is a factor that will promote future collaboration between the professions of nursing and dentistry.

DISCUSSION

It is the author’s belief that the methodology of teaching an interdisciplinary class of nursing and dental students is critical for the students to learn the skill of collaborative team building. Possible formats include:

1. A simple lecture with limited class discussion and written weekly assignments.
2. A class discussion of a specific clinical case. This would be similar to the format presently used in the College of Nursing.
3. An informal class discussion on any topic that a student introduces for discussion. This would be similar to the format presently used in the College of Nursing.

4. The format presented by the author in this manuscript.

It is the author's belief that the first format will produce parallel learning between the nursing and dental students. It is a format not conducive to collaborative learning. The author believes that the second and third formats will produce informal interaction, but not create a foundation upon which future collaboration between the professions will continue to occur. It will lead to the same parallel health care management of patients that occurs now in the joint community outreach screening programs. The author asserts that the format presented in this manuscript is the best way to promote interdisciplinary collaborative learning and lead to the development of long-lasting relationships between these different groups of professional students following graduation.

POSTSCRIPT

The author was unable to create an interdisciplinary elective in bioethics involving nursing and dental students. The physical separation of the two colleges was deemed by the faculty at both schools to an insurmountable hurdle. The faculty at each college did not want to commute to the other college on a regular basis. The time necessary to commute between the colleges was prohibitive to conducting the class during the school day. Possible solutions entailed alternating the classes between the colleges and conducting the class either early in the morning prior to the commencement of classes or in the evening following the end of classes. Neither solution was well received. It is possible that the author, a part-time clinical assistant professor, did not have the political clout necessary to creating the compromises necessary for bringing the class into existence.

In the Spring of 2011, the Curriculum Committee of the College of Dentistry did approve the creation of an elective in bioethics, along the guidelines presented in this manuscript, for dental students only. The class will begin next year.
NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Twelfth International Conference On Ethics Across the Curriculum, Union Graduate College, Schenectady, New York, October 9, 2010.
2 http://www.nyu.edu/nursing/magazine/nursingsummer2010.pdf; p.3.