

Book Review

The Cambridge textbook of bioethics, Singer PA, Viens AM, editors (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK) 2008. 538 pages. Price: Not mentioned. ISBN 978-0-521-69443-8 (Paper back)

Ethical issues have become important to the medical profession. Medical Council of India (MCI) has introduced medical ethics as a subject in the medical curriculum. Many Universities in the country are introducing ethics as a separate subject. There has been a tremendous push to educate our scientific community on the need for research ethics. With the advent of biotechnology, the press also discusses ethical issues raising a public debate and concerns.

There are a few books on ethics in the Indian market. Fly by night operators write many of these books and these contain either only legal issues or mismatched ethical issues! Western books mainly concentrate on the ethical issue and rarely cover the legal issues. The Cambridge Textbook of Bioethics combines ethics, law and public policy issues.

The main aim of the book is to address how greater recognition of ethical issues and their resolution can improve patient care problems and institutional care. The book covers the three main areas of bioethics. These are academic bioethics, clinical ethics, and public policy and law.

There are 10 sections in the book and it covers the topic of bioethics extensively. Each chapter in the section begins with a few cases that present ethical dilemmas. These cases are used as a means of contextualizing the relevant ethical issues. The chapters try to answer the questions of what is it? Why is it important and how should it be approached in practice? Each of the chapters brings about the ethical as well as legal issues. This juxtaposition of ethical issues with legal issues will be of tremendous value

to the Indian healthcare worker, as we always tend to marry ethics with legality.

The aim of the book is to be practical, versatile, comprehensive, and institutional. The book achieves all these aims. Apart from the conventional topics like consent, confidentiality, end of life care, pregnancy and biotechnology and research ethics, it also has new sections that are not seen in conventional textbooks of bioethics.

A section on health systems discusses issues related to the institutions. There is a good chapter on public health ethics and on rural care ethics. These chapters identify the problems of public health issues that we face in our practice. Ethics during the time of natural disasters is another issue. The problem of distributing resources as well as triage is discussed. There is a misleading chapter on community health. Community health in the Indian context refers to public health but in the book, it relates local communities.

Section VII is on clinical ethics and its impact on health care. This section deals with teaching and systems thinking. This section is mainly academic in nature.

Developing trend is to discuss global health. This book has a section on global health. It discusses torture, a hot topic in medical practice. It also talks of corporate social responsibilities and Justice.

Practice of clinical ethics cannot be separated from religion. Patients' decisions and behaviour are influenced by their religious beliefs. Ethicists have to take into account this aspect of patients. This is the first book on ethics that comprehensively covers all the major religions of the world. After a brief review, it identifies the ways in which bioethics is addressed in these religions.

As medicine becomes specialist oriented, there is a need to look at specialty ethics. The last section of the book deals with specialties that have more than their share of ethical problems. This section is enjoyable to read.

Each of the chapter begins with two or three cases. At the end of the chapter, the cases are discussed. The reader can use these cases as a pre- and post-test for learning.

The laws that are quoted are mainly from Western (Canada, USA, England, and Australia) jurisdictions. Very few cases are quoted from developing countries. This is one of the drawbacks of using this book in the

Indian context. The case laws quoted in the book have a bearing on cases decided in India. Hence, it is not a great disadvantage.

In my opinion, this book fulfils all the requirements for a good practical ethics book and I suggest that all medical schools should have a copy of this book in their libraries.

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