

FOR THE PATIENT'S GOOD**The restoration of beneficence in health care**

Edmund Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma
Oxford University Press (1988)

240 pages. Price £22.50

For the patient's good is a companion to the previous work by these distinguished authors, *A philosophical basis of medical practice*, which sought to elucidate an underlying structure in the messy pragmatism of everyday practice, and in particular to establish a coherent value system with which to navigate the turbulent waters of specialism, commercialism, legalism, and defensiveness which characterize medicine in the western world. Their thesis in this work is that the current emphasis on the patient's autonomy as the over-riding ethical principle may act to the disadvantage of patients by devaluing another principle, beneficence ('only do good'). The authors claim that patients need a doctor's healing powers, including powers over their lives, more than they need autonomy, especially when that autonomy is diminished by the effects of disease.

The concepts of autonomy and paternalism are critically examined and their contextual, existential, and conceptual limitations listed. Paternalism is divided into 'strong' (the insensitive, arrogant assumption of power) and 'weak' (the shaping of patient decisions by filtration of the information provided for them), and then, importantly, carefully differentiated from beneficence, which some workers would argue is paternalism.

This is not an easy book, and assumes at least some previous reading in the field. It could not be recommended as a standard work for trainees, but for the thinking doctor, and perhaps the course organizer considering how to frame the ethical component of a day release course, this could be a most valuable book. In particular it addresses rigorously the everyday problems of practice: decisions under uncertainty, the physician as gatekeeper, and arguments about the quality of life. Pellegrino and Thomasma quote Harvey Cushing's call to reconsecration (to a higher level of self effacement) and go on to review the ways in which the 'moral cement of shared values', on which Cushing could rely, have been greatly weakened. They not only call for a reconstruction of medical ethics, but furnish the reader with foundations and scaffolding with which to approach the task. In doing so, they have provided help for any doctor who, at the end of a working day, wonders whether he or she has done good to the patients. For such doctors this is a book to be bought, read, and reread.

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TREAT ME RIGHT**Essays in medical law and ethics**

Ian Kennedy

Oxford University Press (1988)

375 pages. Price £35.00

If you thought that medical law was mainly concerned with matters of negligence and the realms of the protection societies, this book will soon disabuse you. It is a selection of previously published papers covering 15 years of the author's work in the field; the older papers benefit from postscripts that bring the arguments up to date. Ian Kennedy sees medical law as a discrete area concerned with the interactions between doctors and patients and the organization of health care. These essays are concerned with the way such interactions should be ordered. Bringing together the author's views on situations as disparate as the care of the very low birthweight baby, contraception for those

under 16 years of age and the discontinuation of ventilators enables one to see the development and unity of his thought and its relation to his basic ethic.

The autonomy and responsibility of the individual and the role of the wider community in setting limits to medical decision making are two recurrent themes. The author's analysis of legal decisions is incisive and enables one to understand the basis of current law. However, he does not always defend the underlying ethical principles that guide him in his more critical analyses and this area could benefit from more discussion.

At times one is frustrated by the citation of legal cases without a brief resume of the details. Perhaps, as the style of references suggests, this is a book directed more to lawyers than to doctors. Such a view would be unfortunate as it provides a rich source of material for all involved in consideration or teaching of the ethical and legal issues that affect our practice.

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