The ethics of health communication
T. Strasser & J. Gallagher

The scope of application of ethical principles in health communication is discussed with particular reference to the influence of the mass media on people's perceptions of benefit and risk in the field of health care.

Health communication, a two-way process, takes place among biomedical scientists, between scientists and medical practitioners, between health professionals and the mass media, and between the mass media and the public. Because it is a means of combating disease and improving or protecting health it should be conducted in accordance with certain ethical principles, namely those of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for personal autonomy, and justice. The communicator of information about diseases and their treatment, health care, disease prevention and health promotion should, as far as possible, seek feedback from the recipient so as to assess whether and how messages are understood and accepted.

Health professionals and patients

Health professionals observe the ethical obligation of respect for the autonomy of the individual by seeking and obtaining patients' informed consent to diagnostic, therapeutic and preventive interventions. This means that patients have to be adequately informed of the purpose and nature of interventions and of possible alternatives. Consent should be sought in a respectful manner, free of intimida-
Scientists and the mass media

When scientists communicate information to journalists it should not be presented out of context and no essential material should be withheld. The presentation of scientific information in popular form requires accuracy, clarity, accountability, honesty and decency. Of course, ethical norms may change as new knowledge is gained.

Benefit may be achieved and harm avoided in some instances by giving information that is incomplete or only partly truthful, provided that it is accurate and not misleading. Reports of beneficial treatments are more likely to be published in the medical literature and subsequently in the mass media than are accounts of risky treatments. On the other hand, the media tend to overstate the risks associated with drugs and medical devices, thereby causing anxiety and even inducing some people to discontinue vital treatment. This amounts to impairing their ability to make informed decisions and violating their right not to be harmed.

The mass media and the public

Journalists and other communicators should respect the autonomy of readers and audiences so that they can make rational decisions. Information that is transmitted should be true, accurate and sufficient, and journalists should therefore check or at least be satisfied with the reputability and reliability of their sources.

In order to attract readers the media sometimes report information on medical research out of context or otherwise misrepresent it. However, this may also happen as a consequence of poor communication between research workers and journalists, hence the need for biomedical scientists to improve their skills in this area so as to reduce the risks of eventual misrepresentation to the public.

Applying ethical principles in health communication

Although respect for individual autonomy implies truthfulness on the part of physicians, benefit may be achieved and harm avoided in some instances by giving information that is incomplete or only partly truthful, provided that it is accurate and not misleading. In certain circumstances, for example, a physician may not be morally obliged to tell a patient the whole truth if this is not necessary for informed consent to a medical intervention.

Excessive health information may undermine the public’s capacity to absorb essential advice and respond to it in a rational way. Journalists who communicate medical information should not compromise ethical principles for commercial purposes.

Good journalists recognize the limitations of facts taken out of context and are aware of their potential for misinformation and harm and of the ethical shortcomings of communicating them. Concealing or misrepresenting a context may take the form of failing to identify a research sponsor, for instance in the event of studies on lung cancer sponsored by the tobacco industry.

An obligation to benefit some people has to take account of any associated risk of harming others. The principle of beneficence implies providing net benefit, and health communicators should therefore make harm/benefit analyses. To do this they have to understand, weigh and specify the harm that is being risked and the likely benefits of an item of information. Assessments of harm and benefit
may vary between members of the public, journalists and doctors. Harm may result from a misinformed decision, as happened when the uptake of pertussis vaccination declined in the United Kingdom following unbalanced and inaccurate reporting of the associated risks. Journalists should try to anticipate the responses of their readerships and audiences, who should be informed about opposing views.

Clearly, communicating information about harm and benefit in such a way as to respect the autonomy of individuals and their right to make up their own minds is ethically distinct from presenting it in a manner believed by a campaigning communicator to be beneficial. Sensationalism and scaremongering are not consistent with ethical principles.

All persons involved in health communication have an ethical responsibility to do no harm to the public. Journalists’ loyalties should be to their readers rather than their sources. Where there is a risk of harm to the public, journalists should take the public’s side.

In France and some other countries, medical journalists have a written code of ethics. Elsewhere, for instance in the United States, ethical issues are decided on a case-by-case basis. Many countries have regulations requiring the pharmaceutical industry to communicate information about the safety of its products to consumers. Physicians who conduct biomedical research involving human subjects have strict ethical codes. This diversity of controls perhaps gives good grounds for drawing up an international written code of ethics for the communication to the public of information pertaining to health.

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