

Bioethical Dilemmas in Dentistry in the COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization has designated COVID-19 as a Pandemic. Healthcare providers have a sacred duty to educate patients about these risks and to ensure that the guidelines provided by the governing body guide them in preventing the virus from spreading. A dentist must follow basic bioethical principles such as benevolence, autonomy, causing no harm, and justice in order to instill the patient-doctor trust and to have healthy clinical practice. It should be emphasized that the use of these principles is of extreme importance in facing the ethical issues especially during the novel corona virus pandemic.

Keywords: bioethics, dentistry, COVID-19, novel corona virus, dentist.

Introduction

As the novel corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to spread around the world, it poses increasing challenges for human survival nationally and globally. It is the most serious public health challenge faced by India today, with implications beyond the health sector, including socio-economic discrimination.

What is Bioethics?

Ethics is a moral principle or virtue that governs the character and behavior of individuals or groups. As a branch of philosophy and theology, it is a methodical study of rightness and goodness related to character and behaviour [1]. According to UNESCO Bioethics can be defined as the systematic, pluralistic and interdisciplinary study involving the theoretical and practical moral issues raised by the life sciences and humanity's relationship with the biosphere [2].

Bioethics can be explained according to the following principles:-

- **Patient Autonomy (self-governance):** According to this principle, the primary duty of dentists is to enable patients to participate in treatment decisions in a meaningful way, while giving due consideration to the needs, desires and skills of patients as well as protecting the privacy of patients [3].
- **Non -Maleficence (do no harm):** This principle explains the need for professionals to protect patients from harm. According to this principle, the main responsibility of the dentist is to keep the knowledge and skills up-to-date, know when and where to ask the expert or another expert for help. It is recommended to entrust patient care to an auxiliary institution [3].
- **Beneficence (do good):** This principle explains the concept that professionals must act for the benefit of others. According to this principle, the first duty of a dentist is to serve patients. The most important aspect of this obligation is to provide dental care promptly and competently [3].
- **Justice (fairness):** This principle represents the concept that experts are responsible for fair dealing with patients, colleagues and society. According to this principle, the primary duties of dentists include fair treatment of patients without prejudice. In the broadest sense of the word, this principle expresses the concept that dental professionals should actively seek local colleagues for specific activities to help improve healthcare for all [3].

Areas of Concern

Consent form

The nature of informed consent does not only mean that patients are expected to sign a contract that confirms that they can receive treatment, but also to provide them with a fair and balanced assessment of the treatment. In current situation a separate screening form should be made mandatory along with the consent form, detailing the current symptoms of the patients with their travel history. Temperature with sensor thermometers maybe used to record patient temperature to verify.

Confidentiality

It is important to appreciate the unique position of trust that a practitioner is placed in by virtue of the doctor- patient relationship. It is precisely this trust that gives rise to the belief on the part of the patient that the practitioner will uphold, as a private fiduciary, all voluntary promises, commitments, and oaths whether implied or explicitly made. However, a dentist should follow the national law vis-a-vis sharing of information of suspect patients only with the government agencies.

Fees

Rising cost of health care can limit patient access to health care, limited resources can lead to rationing and delaying, and denial of care to people in need [4]. Especially in Covid-19 times when the doctors have to invest more in the equipment like PPE and amplified sterilization measure, this escalating cost can lead to inverse care law. Appropriate correction in fees maybe carefully implemented in clinics for the best outcome.

Emergency care

Dental clinics invariably carry the risk of novel coronavirus infection because of the inherent nature of procedures performed. This is the reason that the regulatory bodies have advised the dentists to only tend to emergency care. In case the individual has trouble eating or is experiencing other discomforts that may lead complete disruption of normal routine, such patients should also be considered under emergency care.

Quality of care

Dentist need to provide good quality care to patients to justify the faith with which patient has approached the dentist [5]. Fully documented and complete information regarding patient's treatment must be shared with the patient. The quality of care should not interfere with the current situation of scarcity in protective aids and amplified workload of strict sterilization measures.

Sterilization

Due to the inherent nature of the procedures performed, dental clinicians are always at risk of contracting novel coronavirus. It is advised to follow strict sterilization protocols in the dental clinic including disinfection in the reception or patient waiting area. It is suggested that appropriate steps are taken before and after the patient leaves the clinic according to the Standard Operating Protocols depending on set up, geographical location and supplemental laws of the area.

Waste management

As the clinics have been following proper sterilization protocols, it is more crucial to follow even stricter measures for biomedical waste disposal system because 'you can heal what you see, but you can't heal what you can't see'. Proper downing and doughing steps should be used. The process is easily accessible on government websites.

Proper knowledge

The present scenario overemphasizes the knowledge and skill while least importance is given to the clinical ethics, which is the heart of healthcare training. Being unaware of appropriate Covid-19 protocols, one can endanger the whole community around. It maybe advised to assimilate proper knowledge through WHO online courses.

Cannot refuse a patient

A dentist cannot refuse or discriminate against a Covid-19 positive patient. Under the principle of 'Justice', the dentist's primary obligations include dealing with people justly and delivering dental care without prejudice.

Online consultancy

While social distancing is in effect, most of dentists have been advised to shut down their setups and tend only to emergency care. Although there are patients who do not fall under the category of emergency care but still need immediate pharmacological intervention. Therefore, some of the professionals have opted for online consultancy, such patients must be tele-counselled and should be scheduled for when regular dental services are restored by the time everything gets as usual. Prescribing medicines over telephonic conversations has been inappropriate. In current situation charging online fees for the same is also debatable.

Hospital consultation

Consultation is common practice when it comes to health care sector. If a dentist is not fully equipped according to the protocols of Covid-19, he/she advised to consult a hospital for the emergency procedures to be carried out.

Advertising

Advertising is still a debatable subject when it comes to bioethics, but it may be preferred that if a clinic is well equipped with all the protective aids for Covid-19, it can announce its compliancy to help the patients in the need of emergency dental treatment.

Minimum possible attendants

While social distancing is a major preventive measure against the spread of novel corona virus, it is preferred that minimum possible attendants should accompany the patients into the clinic. It is

also advised to avoid clustering of attendants in the waiting area by giving a substantial time lag in between the appointments.

Distribution of protective aid

Shortage of hand sanitizers and masks has become a problem around the globe. However, a dental professional cannot charge or take any kind of favour in lieu of giving such aids to the people working within the clinic or the patients.

Conclusions

The dangers of novel corona viruses are threatening. As a healthcare provider, we have an ethical responsibility to educate patients about these risks and to ensure that the guidelines provided by the governing body guide us in preventing the virus from spreading. At the same time, we have to do everything we can to meet our bioethical commitments and help our patients. The situation continues to be dynamic with the scenario together with regulations are upgraded even each day. The health care worker needs to be conscious of these changes and must keenly follow the government's health care website to be suitably updated. The situation needs to be tackled with knowledge, common sense and awareness.

"A problem is a chance for you to do the Best"
So, let's all put our best foot forward.

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