
Ethical Issues in Nutritional Sciences for the Next Century: Nutrition Research and Counseling on Nutraceutical Supplementation and Disease

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Ethical issues pertaining research and counseling in nutritional sciences will be arising in this new century. This issue will be of great importance especially in the area of nutraceutical supplementation and disease

(pharmacological nutrition). Steps to insure bioethical correctness are discussed in this paper.

Key words: Ethics, Nutritional sciences, Nutraceutical supplementation.

The Nutritionist/Dietitian's education compiling knowledge in nutritional, medical, psychosocial, behavioral and food sciences as well as in philosophy and ethics provides them with expertise in feeding healthy and sick people in addition of determining their nutritional needs. In this aspect most previous ethical principles were circumscribed to the feeding of permanently unconscious patients (1,2). Since various ethical principles can be seemingly in conflict in the care of patients who are permanently unconscious (such as sanctity of life), the healthcare professional's duty is to provide life-sustaining care and respect for personal autonomy.

Healthcare professionals have an inherent ethical obligation to respect the sanctity of life and to provide relief from suffering. Beneficence, autonomy and justice are accepted moral principles governing behavior of healthcare professionals within society (3). Technological and medical advances have made progress so rapidly that have created a conflict between application of these moral principles and the use of certain types of treatment (4).

This aspect gets even more complicated when we talk about clinical research, about blind and double blind studies. These studies are done even with evidence that

such treatment can be beneficial, therefore depriving a group of persons a possible effective treatment just for the sake of a study. Is this morally correct? Historical controls that match the characteristics of the treatment group can be used, but this has been severely criticized for not being scientifically correct. Is it more important to be scientifically correct or to be bioethically correct?

Discussion

It has always been of a questionable nature, the thin line between what is politically correct and morally correct in health sciences clinical research. Ethical considerations have been raised about providing dietary advice (5) in cases such as fat intake and risk of cancer, an area in which documentation of increase risk should be plenty. This particular issue has now become even more relevant in Nutritional Sciences because of the new nutritional related research. New research on herbs, plants, vitamins, minerals, quasi-nutrients and amino acids is expanding the horizon of the nutritional and medical sciences. Surprisingly these advances lack the wide acceptance you would expect from either the nutrition professionals or the physicians; this is probably due to:

- hesitation to accept new ideas or to keep updated in a vast and complex field requiring in depth and updated knowledge in many areas of science such as physiology, anatomy, chemistry and biochemistry
- ignorance, lack of interest or knowledge of the new areas in research of the nutritional-medical sciences

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- fear of new approaches and advances that may threaten the original basis or the foundation of your profession. These three factors can create science's most dangerous enemy: the *inertia effect*. Such an ultra conservative stand severely limits creativeness and advances in science, although a balance between conservatism and liberalism is always needed. We should be liberal enough to enhance and promote creativity and advancement of sciences, but we should also be conservative enough to prevent early or premature reporting of preliminary results that could lead to false expectations and require confirmation.

In relation to the nutritionist/dietitians role on the new nutraceutical supplementation and disease trend, the main question is, whether it is ethical for the nutritionist/dietitian to recommend supplements for different diseases and/or as ergogenic aids? The American Dietetic Association has its own code of ethics and it has been at the vanguard of professional associations and credentialing bodies that have adopted voluntary enforcement of this code of ethics (6). This altruistic, service-oriented code emphasizes that the dietetic practitioner will practice with objectivity, respect the unique needs and values of individuals and avoid discrimination (6-8). This will be done in good faith and conducted with honesty, integrity and fairness, although following a professional code does not automatically lead to ethical decision making. Since the health professional is committed to the care of human beings in a state of need for expert advice, any professional decision will require ethical analysis. Such analysis engages the person as a whole in a process of self-reflection and critique of action that a code of ethics does not provide (3). Although the macro-tuning of any nutritional treatment should first be diet therapy, supplementation can be regarded as the micro-tuning required to optimize a system.

We suggest the following guidelines for nutritionists/dietitians and physicians interested in nutrition:

- visit the library, take continued education courses, read current journals, use MEDLINE to search new topics and topics of particular interest to update professional and personal knowledge. Share information with your colleagues.
- be sure that whatever you recommend will cause no harm, even at the suggested therapeutic dosages. Follow the "good faith" principle to be always fair and honest.
- feel comfortable implementing, adding, enriching your knowledge. The addition of new

knowledge is always an advantage to your profession.

Conclusion

Once these three steps are applied, it is unlikely that any decision you take will be bioethically incorrect. Supplementation and disease is a controversial area in nutrition, mainly because of the difficulty to research these areas full of interfering variables. There has been a boom in the use and sale of nutraceuticals (herbs, vitamins, minerals and quasi-nutrients) in health food stores, pharmacies and supermarkets. This rapidly developing area of science is caught in between nutrition, pharmacology and medicine, it has not been adequately defined and no formal specialization in this area exists to date. We lack a true health professional with proven expertise in this field. The health professional (nutritionist, pharmacist, physician) should evaluate existing data and proceed in the best interest of their patients, peer discussion on ethical issues will help in ethical decision making. This will assure bioethical correctness in the decision or performance of the health professional.

Resumen

En el nuevo siglo surgirán asuntos de ética relacionados a la investigación y consejería en las ciencias nutricionales. Estos asuntos serán de gran relevancia, especialmente en el área de suplementos nutricionales y enfermedad (nutrición farmacológica). Se discuten los pasos para asegurar una bioética correcta.

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