

בית

Jewish Medical Ethics

JLI Fall 2010



Jewish Medical Ethics

JLI Fall 2010

Course Overview

As medicine advances and life expectancy increases, almost all of us will at some point encounter an ethical dilemma in dealing with our own health or the health of a loved one.

How is Jewishness determined in the case of surrogate motherhood? Is it permissible, or perhaps even obligatory, to donate a kidney to save the life of a loved one? May one pursue a dangerous experimental treatment that has the risk of shortening life? Should children and teens have the autonomy to refuse potentially lifesaving treatment because of its arduous side effects, even when their parents disagree with their decision?

Modern medicine creates many new quandaries as it continually pushes the boundaries of what is possible. But Jewish law creatively draws analogies with ancient paradigms to provide guidance through the maze of medical decision making.

In this engaging course, we will examine some contemporary case studies, comparing secular and Jewish approaches as a means of developing ethical understanding.

This course will be available for CME credit (and possibly CLE credit, depending on the state and its particular guidelines). Students pursuing continuing education credit may have to fulfill additional requirements.



Syllabus

Lesson 1

Choices, Choices: The Ethics of Patient Autonomy

The modern medical age offers hope for many dire medical situations, but does so at a price. As medical intervention increases, quality of life often decreases. This lesson examines Jewish perspectives on pursuing medical care, as well as declining it. Is it ever acceptable, or even preferable, to simply rely on faith, prayer, and one's own resources? How does Judaism justify medical intervention? And is it an obligation or a choice? May other family members force us to seek treatment that we do not want? Do our personal preferences and values hold any weight? And does the same hold true for children? This lesson examines the ethics of issues involving patient autonomy within the modern health care system.

Lesson 2

Becoming a Parent: The Ethics of Assisted Reproduction

Many couples struggle with infertility. In their efforts to bear a child, they are often cast into the complicated ethical web of the new reproductive technologies, many of which call into question the very definition of parent. In the age of sperm donation, egg donation, and surrogacy, can a child have more than two parents? How is Jewishness determined? How does Judaism look at "designer babies?" Can we pre-select the gender of the child to match parent preferences or to prevent genetic illnesses? How far must one go in the quest for biological children, and what recourse is there for those who are unable to bear children of their own?



Lesson 3

I Have a Secret: The Ethics of Confidentiality

A basic presumption of modern medical practice is that patients have a right for their medical history to be kept confidential unless they explicitly waive those rights (such as in allowing records to be reviewed by an insurance company). What happens, however, when those records contain information that might impact other family members? May a man hosting an incurable communicable disease withhold that information from his wife? Does a woman willing to donate a kidney to a man she presumes to be her father have the right to know that in fact, he is not related to her at all? Do children have the right to know they are carriers of a particular disease, or may the parent keep that information private? This lesson looks at some ways of balancing the harm to the individual whose privacy is invaded against the need to provide family members with vital health information.

Lesson 4

All Kinds of Minds: Mental Difference in Jewish Tradition

The mentally ill have often been viewed in society as possessed by the devil, or otherwise evil. Jewish law, however, has long recognized this as a disease, and acknowledges both the limitations of responsibility that this state imposes, as well as the essential humanity of the mentally ill. Jewish law recognizes that there may well be islands of ability at the same time that limitations exist. It encourages the maximum participation possible of those with mental illnesses, while outlining the role the community must play in protecting their interests. The lesson also considers the integration of individuals who may suffer from mental retardation, and the value of engaging them actively in Jewish life.



Lesson 5

The Gift of Life: The Ethics of Organ Donation

Hundreds of thousands of people find their lives hanging in the balance as they hope for the gift of life in the form of a vital organ such as a heart, lung, or kidney. By receiving an organ, they are literally given a new leaf on life. Yet there is a tremendous shortage of available organs. Does Jewish law allow the donation of organs, either from a live donor or one who is recently deceased? Might it go further, actively encouraging or even morally compelling one to donate under certain circumstances? Conversely, if our bodies are not our own, do we even have the authority to give a body part away? This lesson provides a nuanced and compassionate look at the sensitive ethical issues governing organ donation.

Lesson 6

Rolling the Dice: The Ethics of Medical Experimentation

Often, people with rare or incurable illnesses consider untested experimental treatment, gambling that they will be cured. May one participate in an experimental treatment with no guarantee of success that also has the danger of shortening life? Can we define the allowable odds? Does it matter that participating in this experimental treatment will provide important knowledge that will be helpful in curing others? The lesson considers other ethical issues related to experimentation such as the ethics of stem cell research.

