

BOOKS

Outstanding introduction to ethical complexities

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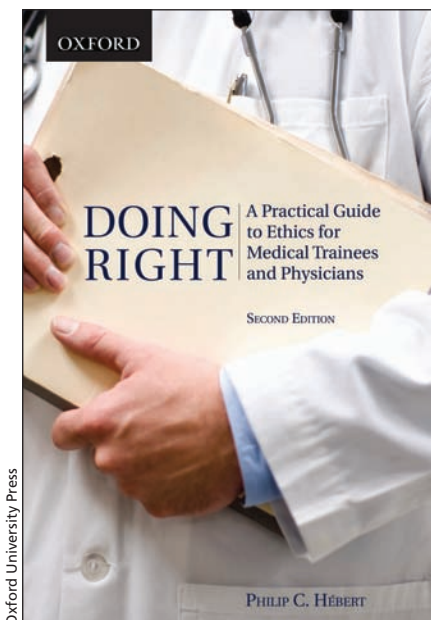
Doing Right: A Practical Guide to Ethics for Medical Trainees and Physicians, 2nd edition

Philip C. Hébert

Oxford University Press; 2009.

Philip Hébert has done a remarkable job with a nearly impossible task. Drawing on his extensive experience as a family physician, bioethics consultant and chair of the Research Ethics Board at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Ontario, Hébert covers several of the major content areas commonly encountered in health care ethics and describes an approach to ethical reasoning all in one succinct volume. The pragmatic choice, which favours brevity does mean that essential material is left out, however Hébert makes considerable effort to direct the interested reader to further resources.

The opening chapter provides an overview of basic ethical principles of



facts one ought to know (for example, the definition of capacity as laid out in legislation) and the more nuanced aspects of specific cases that cannot be settled easily by recourse to rules (for example, applying the definition of capacity to a particular individual).

Hébert strikes a balance between the facts one ought to know and the more nuanced aspects of specific cases.

autonomy, beneficence and justice, as well as an outline of a comprehensive approach to ethical reasoning using a clinical case. The subsequent 10 chapters are each devoted to a central issue, such as confidentiality, informed consent and truth-telling. Hébert discusses relevant case examples and precedent-setting legal cases, relevant ethical principles and his own arguments. As such, he strikes a balance between the

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching clinical ethics is the need to avoid mirroring the black-and-white approach to clinical problem-solving, particularly the pursuit of the “right answer,” which is characteristic of the early training years.

Hébert provides many cases to illustrate the complexity of ethical reasoning, but few are analyzed in a comprehensive way that does justice to the

model of ethical reasoning he presents in the first chapter. It is exactly this model that is the core feature of clinical ethics and is so difficult to teach. Readers would have benefited from more detailed examples. Furthermore, in many of the cases he presents, Hébert shows that the problem is really one of poor communication or lack of understanding between the parties. The “ethical” dilemma melts away when these difficulties are addressed. While this is often true in actual practice, sometimes one really does have to make a choice between two competing ethical imperatives. Hébert does make this point briefly, but it would have been helpful to have had more discussion of how ethical reasoning can or cannot help the clinician in the truly hard cases where any decision leads to the compromise of at least one ethical principle.

As is typical of clinical ethics, the book focuses largely on ethical issues arising in the doctor–patient relationship. Increasingly however, we are aware of ethical issues that arise intra- and interprofessionally, as well as between practitioners and institutions. While Hébert gives us a few examples of these types, more such examples would have been welcome, particularly as these tend to be taboo topics within professional cultures that value obedience, conformity, and professional solidarity. Despite these minor criticisms, this book is an outstanding introduction to a complex subject that teachers, clinicians and trainees will find informative and useful.

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