

Honesty in Medicine

Student Name

PHI 208: Ethics and Moral Reasoning

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### **Part 1: Ethical Question**

Do doctors have the moral obligation to tell the truth to patients even in instances where the truth can be devastating?

### **Part 2: Introduction**

Truth-telling is an important aspect of human interaction as it fosters effective communication. The need, to tell the truth, is emphasized in churches, at home, learning institutions, at work and the doctor-patient relationship (Drane & Reich, 2009). Considerably, physicians are required to sign the “Hippocratic Oath,” a consent that mandates them to uphold the profession’s code of ethics including truth-telling to establish an effective relationship with their patients. As such, doctors are bestowed with trust, a belief that they will be honest in their assertions for the benefit of both parties. It is through this conviction that patients can confide in physicians and seek advice from them. For the treatment to work, that patient needs to have faith in the physician and the treatment, an aspect that is often referred to as the placebo effect (Fletcher, 2015). Often, physicians are perceived as the most trusted professionals given the fact that they are most likely, to tell the truth in most situations.

While physicians are obligated to tell the truth to patients to relieve anxiety and fears, it is a hard task given the fact that the truth can be devastating. As such, this can have a significant impact on the placebo effect given the reduced trust on the proposed treatment (Swaminath, 2010). Notably, the failure, to tell the truth, can take different forms, serve many purposes and result in different consequences (Drane & Reich, 2009). Often, doctors may necessarily not lie to the patient but rather withhold information on the proposed interventions or the patient’s condition or provide information that is literally true but deceptive. This is common for conditions that are associated with stigmatizing diagnosis such as cancer (Swaminath, 2010).

However, does this mean that withholding information without patient consent is justifiable? The paper will examine whether doctors have the moral obligation, to tell the truth even in instances when truth-telling can be devastating.

### **Part 3: Explanation of the Ethical Theory**

The utilitarianism ethical theory was chosen for discussion. Notably, the first account for utilitarianism was developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) (Mill, 2016). However, it is presumed that the core insight that motivated the theory occurred much earlier. The core insight stipulated that morally appropriate behavior will not harm other people but rather increase their happiness or “utility.” The early precursors of the classical Utilitarian’s comprised of Shaftesbury, Cumberland, British Moralists and Hutcheson (Mill, 2016). When it comes to action choice, Francis Hutcheson is regarded to as an explicit utilitarian. Considerably, John Stuart Mill was associated with utilitarianism as he emphasized on maximizing the good for the greatest number (Mill, 2016).

The utilitarianism ethical theory is built on three core principles. Notably, utilitarianism obtains its name from “utility” which does not infer to usefulness but rather “happiness” or “pleasure” (Westacott, 2018). The principle inferred that happiness or pleasure is the only thing with intrinsic value. This meant that something is good in itself. The second principle emphasized that actions are considered right in so far as they enhance happiness and wrong when they produce unhappiness. This principle made utilitarianism to seem consequential as the action is gauged by its consequence (Westacott, 2018). Considerably, the theory is based on the principle that everyone’s happiness is equal. While it may be perceived as an obvious moral principle, it was initially perceived that some lives and happiness were more valuable and important than others (Westacott, 2018). Bentham stated that “everyone to count for one; no-one for more than one.”

The ethical theory can be applied to moral questions as it justifies one's outcomes based on the actions. For instance, if one is flying a one-engine airplane over a populated area and the controls fail, he/she will most certainly die from the crash. However, as the pilot can still exert some control over the plane and crash in a dark area, he/she will minimize the misery of the crash. Rather than merely focusing on "keeping promises" or "following the rules" the pilot's actions intend to maximize happiness thus will be regarded as ethical.

#### **Part 4: Application of the Ethical Theory**

Notably, utilitarianism ethical theory determines the right and wrong by focusing on the outcome of one's actions. According to this theory, the most ethical choice is one that will produce the greatest good. While physicians are obligated to tell the truth to patients to relieve anxiety and fears, it is a hard task given the fact that the truth can be devastating. For instance, this can have a negative impact on the placebo effect thereby implying that the patient will not positively respond to the treatment intervention. On the other hand, treatment is more likely to work (placebo effect) if there is faith in the prescribed medication and the doctor (Swaminath, 2010). To achieve this, the physician can withhold some information such as the drug side effects. Given the positive outcomes of the treatment process, the physician's actions will be regarded as ethical given the fact that it produces the greatest good.

Physicians may necessarily not lie to the patient but rather withhold information on the proposed interventions or the patient's condition or provide information that is literally true but deceptive. Considerably, doctors are identified as the most trusted professionals thereby enabling patients to confide in them. However, studies indicate that patients do not necessarily follow the physician's advice thereby highlighting that there is a lack of trust in the doctor-patient relationship (Swaminath, 2010). Given this, doctors are compelled to withhold information on the notion that doing so will benefit the patient. When the outcome is favorable to both the

patient and the doctor, the physician's actions will be regarded as ethical. Primarily, this is based on the fact that it will generate happiness not only to the patients but also to the family members. Based on the principle that actions are right insofar as they enhance happiness and wrong insofar as they project sadness, the doctor's actions are ethical.

## References

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