

A principled Australian text

Ethics and law for the health professions
(Second edition)
Ian Kerridge, Michael Lowe, John McPhee
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In 1979, the American authors Tom L Beauchamp and James F Childress published the first edition of *Principles of biomedical ethics*. They espoused the theory of what has come to be known as “principlism” as a bridge between the deontological and utilitarian approaches to bioethics. They identified four central values — autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice — as the fundamental moral principles in terms of which to address ethical dilemmas in biomedical theory and practice.

Since 1979, *Principles of biomedical ethics* has gone through five editions, and has become a virtually magisterial text, at least in the English speaking world. *Ethics and law for the health professions* bids fair to become equally magisterial in the Australian context. Now in its second edition, it too espoused the principlist approach to bioethical issues, but, like its American counterpart, it acknowledges also the significance of other subsidiary values — professional integrity, veracity, confidentiality, privacy and fiduciary responsibility — to mention but a few.

Ethics and law for the health professions professes to be an introductory text in bioethics and law. It can be used as a teaching resource or as a handbook. It is both comprehensive and detailed, and although the average length of each of its thirty-one chapters is only twenty pages, there is sufficient substance in each chapter both to outline the issues involved and to point towards a resolution. Not everyone —

including this reviewer — will agree with all the resolutions. A liberal individualist view of autonomy and a utilitarian assessment of beneficence tend to hold sway, but other perspectives are carefully examined, and a fair and very up-to-date selection of references is appended to the end of each chapter.

What is particularly to be commended is the structure of the text. The separation of ethics and law in each chapter underlines a very important distinction when addressing these issues. Otherwise the legal decisions can be accepted as putting an end to ethical debate. Further, the “hot” topics of euthanasia, abortion,

IVF, stem cell research, etc., are addressed in the latter third of the book, and to this degree need to be seen against the general ethical and legal theories which are discussed in the first third, and the “procedural” values — veracity, confidentiality, professionalism, etc. — which occupy the middle chapters. There are special chapters on various classes of patients: the elderly; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; and those suffering from mental illness and post-coma unresponsiveness — and the authors do not resile

from presenting strong challenges to contemporary ethical practice, especially in the chapters on organ donation and brain death, experimentation in animals, resource allocation, complementary and alternative medicine and the pharmaceutical industry.

In all, this is an excellent text, and I am sure, like its American counterpart, it will go through many editions.

Reviewer rating: ★★★★★

William J Uren, SJ

Member, Australian Health Ethics Committee;
and Rector, Jesuit Theological College, Parkville, VIC

