Residents’ page

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The role of family physicians has been described as that of patient advocates, community leaders, and resources to their patients. However, anyone who fulfills the aforementioned criteria is unlikely to do so without encountering obstacles. This month’s article by Drs Julie Emili and Rebecca Steen tells of the challenges and accomplishments of a remarkable physician and human rights advocate, Dr Wendy Orr. The authors also share with us their efforts to foster ethical decision making and advocacy in medical students and residents through two workshops held at McMaster University: the Leadership Workshop and the Ethics and Human Rights Workshop.

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Caught in the middle: Ethics and human rights

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The Carl Moore Lectureship in Family Medicine honours Dr Carl Moore, who was Chair of the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont, from 1975 to 1985. The lectureship is complemented by a week of workshops and activities that allow faculty, residents, and other health care professionals to interact with the speaker and further explore the topic of the lecture.

This year we were privileged to host Dr Wendy Orr as the visiting speaker for the Carl Moore Lectureship. Her presentation was entitled “Ethics and Human Rights in Medical Practice—a South African Experience.” Dr Orr qualified as a medical doctor at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in 1983. She was a District Surgeon working in the South African prison system and in 1985 became the first doctor to speak out against the human rights violations of prisoners and political detainees. A District Surgeon was a medical doctor employed by the State who was responsible for the care of patients in State facilities and for medicolegal work including examining rape survivors, performing autopsies in cases of unnatural death, and providing primary care for those in police custody and convicted prisoners.

At the age of 24, she successfully approached the Supreme Court of South Africa to grant an interdiction against the police to prevent assault of detainees. Her work prompted President Nelson Mandela to appoint her Commissioner on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa. She had a substantial role in facilitating and organizing TRC hearings into the roles of health professionals in human rights abuses under apartheid. Currently, she is Director of Transformation and Equity at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She continues to be active in policy development and teaching for health and human rights.

In her speech, Dr Orr described a typical day as District Surgeon and the ethical challenges that she faced. Some of Dr Orr’s duties were to perform admission physical examinations, provide care to prisoners, deem prisoners fit for punishment, and be present for their canings. She would see up to 80 patients in less than 2 hours. All prisoners were seen in the presence of prison officials and all records were kept at the prison. Most of these patients had injuries from police brutality.

When she decided that she could no longer continue to document the police brutality without taking action, she went to her supervisor, Dr Lang, with her concerns. Dr Lang told her that it was not physicians’ responsibility to do anything other than treat the injuries. Dr Lang had also been responsible for Steven Biko’s care and had ignored the neurologic damage Biko suffered that had caused his infamous death. These experiences prompted Dr Orr to approach the Supreme Court, where she was successful in having an urgent interdiction granted that greatly decreased torture of detainees.
As part of the TRC, Dr Orr has critically examined how human rights abuses could occur while the medical community remained silent. Dr Orr said she felt poorly prepared to deal with such issues, having never discussed them during medical school. She ended her lecture with the following plea:

[H]onour your own humanity by recognizing and honouring the humanity of others, regardless of colour, creed, gender, nationality. Honour humanity by valuing the richness that difference creates, by seeking to understand rather than to condemn and by being true to yourself.1

Family medicine residents and medical students were given the opportunity to talk with Dr Orr at a Leadership Workshop and a multidisciplinary Ethics and Human Rights Workshop during her week in Hamilton. Costs of these activities were supported by the Ontario College of Family Physicians. During the 3-hour workshop, we discussed an approach to teaching medical ethics and finalized the agenda for the Ethics and Human Rights Workshop. The group decided on a “blended” approach using a traditional framework developed by Dr Michael Coughlin in Making Ethical Decisions in Health Care2 and a preliminary version of a tool kit drafted by Physicians for Human Rights addressing dual loyalty and human rights in the health care setting.

The Ethics and Human Rights Workshop was held for 25 senior medical, nursing, and rehabilitation students. During this workshop, we used the Coughlin framework2 to take people through ethical decision making using the following steps:

- acknowledge feelings,
- identify problems,
- determine ethically relevant facts,
- consider alternatives,
- examine values,
- evaluate alternatives,
- articulate decisions, and
- implement the plan.

Students were introduced to traditional ethics theory and provided with this framework as a practical approach to making ethical decisions. Dr Orr noted that there are many ways to approach ethical dilemmas and introduced a human rights approach emphasizing international law. She introduced students to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights as well as the tool kit for dealing with dual loyalties in health care. Students were then shown a clip from the movie Cry Freedom portraying the last moments of Stephen Biko’s life and the complacency of the physicians who supposedly cared for him. Workshop participants were then asked to reflect on what they saw, heard, thought, and felt.

The second half of the workshop involved small group case discussions. Each group was facilitated by a faculty family physician and a family medicine resident who had participated in the Leadership Workshop. Participants were asked to share a case where they thought there was an ethical dilemma. Many students’ stories were about having an ethical concern about a clinical scenario and feeling “caught in the middle.” The group then collectively chose one case to which to apply the ethical framework. This format allowed students to develop skills in ethical decision making. Dr Orr circulated among the groups listening to the discussions and offering insight.

The groups reconvened to review what had been discussed in the small groups and evaluate the workshop. Common themes raised included the need to have an approach to ethical issues, allowing time to think about ethical issues, and talking with colleagues about such issues. Dr Orr concluded by re-emphasizing that we are not alone, that our personal values influence making ethical decisions, and that we must acknowledge our humanity at all times. She provided information and a contact address for Physicians for Human Rights at www.phrusa.org. All participants evaluated the event as being very useful and relevant.

We feel very honoured by the opportunity to host Dr Orr for the week. She showed courage in a situation where all others had fled. Dr Orr is an exemplary role model for future physicians and health care workers. With her input we had a unique opportunity for education in ethics from a perspective that was both personally and internationally relevant. We will all remember her moving words and hope that we can incorporate what she shared with us in our own practices.

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References


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