HOW DOES DHARMA PLAY A ROLE IN MEDICAL ETHICS

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Abstract: *This article aims to study how Dharma can be integrated into modern medical ethics to enhance healthcare ethical standards. In comparison with the Indian philosophy of Dharma, which emphasizes duty, compassion, non-violence, and justice, among other things, the traditional Western principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (as established by The Belmont Report and The Declaration of Helsinki) will be considered. This integration provides a comprehensive approach towards ethical behavior in healthcare that promotes empathy and a commitment to collective wellness. It also addresses some healthcare-related ethical dilemmas while promoting a balanced view of health, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This paper calls for cultural enrichment within medical practice based on ethics by adding contemporary principles with those from Dharma.*

Introduction

The principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice are often highlighted in contemporary medical ethics. These principles are rooted in the West and are reflected in documents like *The Belmont Report* and *The Declaration of Helsinki*, which have impacted modern-day bioethics (*Anon*, 2024a). Nevertheless, many other ethical traditions worldwide offer more comprehensive ways of understanding what is right or wrong to do; one example is Indian philosophy, where "Dharma" is considered among the most profound teachings about morality. Dharma is a key concept shared by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, encompassing duties/rights/laws/conduct/virtues/right living, etc., while at the same time integrating them into medical ethics would provide a holistic approach to dealing with human life complexities hence emphasizing oneness harmony balance wholeness interdependence all forms of life (Seetharam, 2013).

I. What Is Meant by Dharma?

Dharma comes from the Sanskrit word "dhri," meaning sustain or uphold. It refers to moral and social obligations that support individual beings' society and the universe. In Hindu thought, this is one goal among four others called Purusharthas, which are Artha (wealth), *Kama* (pleasure) *Moksha* (salvation) (*Anon*, 2024b). It can also be understood as righteousness, lawfulness, duty, etc. On the other hand, Buddhism has its interpretation, too, where it means the teachings of Buddha's universal truth revealed by his ethical guidelines leading to enlightenment and cessation of suffering, while Jainism regards the Dharma path as morality, virtuousness, and liberation. Despite having different meanings at heart, what remains constant about dharma across all cultures is some set rules regulating human behavior so that cosmic and social peace may prevail. Therefore, when applied within healthcare settings, it could reinvigorate present-day practices with a sense of duty and love for mankind in general (Magnuson, 2022, 8).

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II. Perspectives from Indian Philosophy

It becomes crucial to consider the fundamental knowledge of human nature necessary when interacting with one another when considering these ethical guidelines for healthcare. Indian philosophy offers a window into embracing certain life practices that teach the fundamental integrity of humanity. This fosters the idea that there is no longer any difference between us and that these behaviors must be ingrained in daily life to live in harmony and with greater awareness of one another's needs and goals (Ritchie, 1892). In particular, *Advaita Vedanta* discusses the unity of the universe. Living and non-living things are part of the vast cosmos (Advaita Vedanta, n.d.). When a person realizes they are a part of the entire universe and no longer perceive themselves as distinct individuals, they have reached Moksha. According to Swami Vivekananda, people emphasize the fundamentals of morality—that is, helping others is correct, and harming them is wrong— when they recognize their interconnectedness with all people. This theory resonates with *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.

The virtues advocated in Shankaracharya's *Vivek Chudamani* are *Viveka*, *Vairagya*, *Shat-sampatti*, and *Mumukshutva* (Krishnanda, n.d.). *Viveka* is the ability to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary tasks in day-to-day activities. Independence from self-indulgence is known as *Vairagya*. Self-indulgent activities have no lasting value.

A calm and collected mindset that can obtain mental strength internally without the aid of outside sources are known as *shat-sampatti*. This also includes spiritual leaders' guidance. *Mumukshutva* is a desire for Moksha motivated by morality. The goal of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra is to follow Ashtanga Yoga, which consists of the following steps: *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana*, and *Samadhi*. To keep the mind and body free from inhibitions, it is crucial to take self-restraint oaths (*Yama*) and follow a disciplined daily routine (*Niyama*) (Singh, 2018, 120–122). Austere behaviors and contentment will result from this.

Karma Yoga directs one's thoughts, desires, and actions toward a spiritual objective. *Karma* is action, and yoga is the union of the spiritual selves (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2009). Despite their preferences, human beings must behave according to their duties. They are free to act altruistically and not base their performance on their desires. Serving others is reflected in this action. To stop it from deteriorating, *Karma Yoga* provides medical professionals with standards of work ethics. The principles of Dharma align with some parts of Aristotle's Deontology, which emphasizes the obligations of culpability in advancing virtue ethics (Sreekumar, 2012). Indian philosophy includes a shared understanding of all religions, philosophical traditions, and cultural backgrounds. Although it is a challenging task, it encourages responsible behavior and a broad perspective that differs from the laws and regulations created by humans. Dharma, in Mahatma Gandhi's words, is duty and religion combined. Moral and societal order is upheld when everyone carries out their assigned responsibilities (Dhareshwar, 2010). Humanity's religion holds that serving others is the same as serving God. One can advance politically and socially by encouraging Purushartha practice. Gandhi connects duty and Dharma. One definition of Dharma is "quality of soul." An individual needs to be aware of two main things: their essential responsibilities and how they should behave in public. The ability to distinguish between right and wrong is covered in the latter, while the former discusses behaviors that can be deemed morally right. People can live a more moral, nonviolent, and peaceful life by practicing their Dharma. Gandhi emphasized the resonant nature of truth: reality, God, and Dharma itself. This encouraged him to use Satyagraha to resolve disputes. The primary attributes of Satyagraha, an active form of resistance, are *Ahimsa*, *Sadhana*, *Abhaya*, and creative power. Gandhi's nine-point code of conduct for Satyagraha is based on Abhaya (fearlessness) and Ahimsa (non-violence) principles. He

says the highest Dharma is *Ahimsa*, which includes qualities like sympathy and compassion. (Diop, 2020)

Ambedkar expounds on Buddhist ethics in his essay "Buddha and the future of his religion." Ambedkar argued that morality for the Buddha included morality itself (Mukerji, 2020, 12). The attainment of bodily, mental, and verbal purity is the Dhamma, according to the Buddha. Speaking with integrity means being honest with both oneself and other people. Body purity can be attained by renunciating sensual cravings and refraining from harming other living things. The attainment of perfection in life is what the Dhamma symbolizes. This is possible if indulgences of any kind are avoided. The central doctrine of Dhamma is *Nibbana*, which serves as its primary motivation (Vajirañāṇa and Francis Story, 1971, 05). It acknowledges that the soul is a component of the Dhamma and that soul salvation is only possible through letting go of all material pursuits and negative emotions and sentiments like greed and wrath.

III. Professional Ethics

Professional ethics is a set of moral principles and standards that professionals adhere to in a specific profession. It ensures the upholding of trust, integrity, responsibility, fairness, and honesty in the professional realm.

Confluence of Dharma and Professional Ethics

1. Integrity and Honesty—Dharma emphasizes that one should never compromise on the essential aspects of life, such as truthfulness, honesty, and righteousness, to achieve personal gains. Similarly, professional ethics demands the same qualities to foster and build trust among customers/ clients (Shiu, 2023, 09).
2. Responsibility and Duty—Every individual has roles and responsibilities to maintain balance and order, emphasizing the concept of one's duty or *Svadharma*. This can be linked to the concept of professional ethics; professionals are expected to contribute to their respective professions in different ways (Muniapan & Satpathy, 2013, 177).
3. Compassion and Empathy—Dharma encourages us to act with understanding and kindness towards others. This resonates with professional ethics, where a positive collaborative work environment is encouraged amongst stakeholders, colleagues, etc.

Divergence of Dharma and Professional Ethics

1. Individual vs. Collective—Dharma emphasizes the individual's duty to work towards the collective good. This resonates with the spirit of interconnectedness among all human beings (Sivakumar, 2014). However, although professional ethics values teamwork and collaboration, the parameters of success are measured individually.   Finding the right balance between individual aspirations and collective well-being is challenging.
2. Flexibility vs. Rigidity—Dharma's ethical considerations depend on time, situations, and context, making it more flexible and adaptable. In contrast, professional ethics is based on strict codes of conduct. It is difficult to strike a balance between these two differing ideas.
3. Spiritual Dimensions—Dharma dwells in spiritual dimensions, guiding one's actions. However, professional ethics do not integrate spiritual aspects. Integrating them also creates room for disagreement.

Implications for Professionals

The intersections of Dharma and Professional Ethics will help navigate the professionals both their personal values and professional choices.

1. Reflection and Self-awareness—By engaging in reflective practices and aligning Professional Ethics and Dharma, individuals can identify the source of potential conflict and prepare accordingly to make informed decisions.
2. Continuous Learning and Adaptation—Professionals must be informed about the evolving landscape of their respective works of industry developments and ethical standards. Adaptation in ethical discernment is crucial.
3. Ethical Leadership—Ethical leadership is imperative in leadership roles. Setting examples of compassion, integrity, and responsibility is significant and promotes a positive work culture.
4. Balancing Individual and Collective Well-Being—Professionals must recognize their actions' impact on the collective's success and well-being in the broader context (Q&A's on Business and Collective Bargaining, n.d.).

IV．Dharma and Medical Ethics

Medicine is a professional area that works on goodwill and service to humanity. Various dimensions are involved in a balanced relationship between healthcare professionals, patients, and their families, along with research and development of medicines, equipment, and techniques. A need arises to approach them ethically and morally to regulate and sustain all these dimensions. Unethical practices in Medicine remain rampant. To overcome this, sustained moral behavior is encouraged. Many instances of unethical behavior are ignored, and the penalties are primarily cosmetic rather than real (Kontoghiorghes, 2021). Regulators, policymakers, and educationists must be involved to promote a genuine moral attitude. Medical decision-making is influenced by the person's environment, personal experiences, and philosophy.

Healthcare ethics deals with moral issues that arise in healthcare. "In 1979, as an outgrowth of the Belmont Report, Beauchamp and Childress published the first edition of their book Principles of Biomedical Ethics, which features four bioethical principles: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice." (Rich, 2024, 35).

Doing ethics based on these principles is making justified moral decisions. They are the following:

1. Autonomy
It is the ability to act in a self-determined way. In the area of healthcare, the autonomy of the patient is considered where their informed consent is required, supporting and facilitating their choices in the treatment, disclosing to them truthful information, and maintaining their confidentiality.
*a. Informed Consent—*Dempski (2009) says that it is important to describe to the patient the risks and benefits of the treatment in having and not having. They are to be informed about the treatment alternatives and the probable outcomes. The patient's consent must be voluntary, and they should not be under the influence of anything (Ibid., 38). Depending upon the situation, the consent can be verbal, written, or expressed through behavior. Persons must be able to understand the information that is provided to them.
*b. Intentional Non-Disclosure—*There are times when medical professionals do not inform patients about the near harm that might have been done to them. However, they need to be

upfront about it and promote trust; otherwise, keeping it a secret is unethical (AMA Code of Medical Ethics, n.d.). Also, the patients who have waived their right not to be informed have to be considered. Sometimes, therapeutic privilege is also provoked when it is understood that the information can potentially harm or depress the patient.

2. Nonmaleficence

It is an obligation to convey that there is an obligation to do no harm or evil. One must consider the prevention, removal, and promotion of no harm. Those actions must be avoided, as they can potentially cause damage. The crucial aspect of Nonmaleficence is taking due care to abide by the specific standards of what is expected from one's profession (Varkey, 2021, 21). It also provides a scope to avoid any negligence in care.

3. Beneficence

It involves performing actions driven by charity, mercy, and kindness. The primary concern is considering the patient's well-being (Krist, et al, 2017, 288).
Paternalism—Professionals face an ethical dilemma where they must respect the patient's autonomy on the one hand and do what is suitable for the patient (beneficence) on the other. Paternalism occurs when a healthcare professional deliberately overrides a patient's autonomy due to obligation.

4. Justice

It means treating people fairly without any prejudice and ensuring fairness in the treatment. Distributive justice talks about the just allocation of resources. Social justice refers to the distribution of the same rights and opportunities. People with a communitarian approach seek the maximum benefit and freedom of the community rather than the individual (Varkey, 2021, 22). John Rawls' Theory of Justice evaluated quality based on a veil of ignorance on two principles. First, everyone should be given equal liberty despite their adversities. The second one opines that differences can be recognized if the least advantaged are getting any benefits.

V. Relational Aspect Between Dharma and Medical Ethics

Medical professionals are motivated by zeal and vigor, commitment to the community, and ethics. This zeal, however, weakens in the long run as their perspective toward fame, power, and money changes. Their commitment to spiritual progress weakens. To maintain an ethical attitude, they need regular reinforcement. Dharma will help them understand how their purpose in life could be balanced with worldly aspirations. Awakening an ethical attitude requires honoring guidelines and principles, which is challenging. Dharma will help celebrate the ethical principle and resolve ethical dilemmas. An ethical attitude helps interpret the situations wisely and judiciously use the ethical tenets. The principle of Dharma encompasses and extends beyond healthcare (Gilman, 2005, 12). Every human action creates an impact on the environment. Technological progress and advancement in medicines is a work towards social beneficence. When we understand this cosmic dimension, we can understand respect and value towards others.

Medical ethics involves dealing with moral issues, such as patient care research and public health. It answers questions about what is right or wrong in providing medical services while balancing the interests of patients, healthcare workers, and society. Integrating Dharma into this discipline offers an opportunity for more nuanced, culturally appropriate responses to such concerns.

Duty And Responsibility

The central idea behind dharma revolves around duty. Physicians should always act according to their duty towards the patients' community and environment since this will eventually contribute to public health welfare. The concept of duty within the dharma system closely mirrors the Hippocratic Oath, where doctors promise to put the patient first. Nonetheless, these duties transcend the individual level, thus becoming part of the broader cosmic moral order (Berdine, 2015, 28-29).

For example, every doctor is responsible for providing the best possible treatment and ensuring the overall well-being of his or her locality through engagement with various public health programs that call upon them to advocate environmental protection, particularly sustainability, besides addressing social determinants of health. Without healthy communities, individuals can never be considered truly healthy themselves.

Compassion And Non-Violence
Another vital aspect is ahimsa, which stands for non-violence. This ethical precept aligns quite well with the non-maleficence principle, whereby healthcare providers are expected never to cause harm intentionally. However, it goes further than just physical harm by including psychological, emotional, spiritual, etcetera realms, too.

It means that all healthcare givers must approach their patients with sympathy (Karuna) and understand individuals' suffering in all its forms. It calls for an all-around healing process considering the patients' physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual welfare (Roman, Mthembu, and Hoosen, 2020, 02). For example, integrative medicine — an application of Dharma towards comprehensive wellness, can be seen by combining conventional treatments with meditation, yoga, and Ayurveda, among others.

Justice and Equity
Dharma also covers principles of justice and equity essential for medical ethics. According to Hindu philosophy, there is an idea called *Varnashrama Dharma*, which has been controversial historically. However, it contains some parts about duties that depend on one's stage in life or social status (Kumar and Choudhury, 2020). If we interpret this concept inclusively today, it will promote the view that health care must cater to different groups with varied needs, not only serving those who are privileged but also marginalized persons while ensuring they receive equal opportunities to access medical services.

Awareness should, therefore, be created concerning disparities related to health care provision coupled with advocating for policies that address them from a social justice standpoint by incorporating Medical Ethics into Dharma. It means speaking out in favor of universal coverage, working towards eliminating biases within research studies and clinical trials as well as treatments offered, and making sure everyone, regardless of his/her socio-economic background, has access to quality healthcare services, among other things (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and World Health Organization).

Balance and Holistic Health
The balance aspect, called "Samatva," is another essential part of Dharma. It emphasizes maintaining equilibrium at each level, including physical condition, mental state, etc. Regarding ethical considerations within medicine, this principle supports holistic health where all dimensions, such as mental, emotional, and spiritual, are regarded equally important and hence needed for complete well-being (Resnik, 2020). It calls upon practitioners to take treatment options that are technologically advanced alongside traditional methods, thus appreciating the uniqueness surrounding individual cases brought before them by patients. From such a point of view, it is in line with personalized medicine currently gaining ground globally, as well as patient-centered care whereby

treatment plans are made based on specific requirements expressed by an individual patient.

VI. Ethical Dilemmas

Dharma offers a framework for reasoning through the best course of action. *Satyam* (truth), one of the benefits of knowing Dharma, is a virtue that extends beyond simply speaking the truth; it also permeates our thoughts and deeds toward one another and ourselves. It reveals any medical error and upholds a transparent relationship with the patient and the consent process (Seshasayee, n.d.). Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam's philosophy must foster an attitude of service to humanity.

When faced with an ethical dilemma, one must decide between two courses of action. High standards, discipline, persistence, and self-restraint are all components of dedicated service. To provide logical and efficient medical care, one must work honestly, put others' needs ahead of their own, and serve others without regard for money or recognition. Self-policing rules must be implemented internally since they are not susceptible to external influence. Other ethical issues in healthcare include the creation of medications and their promotion, which need to be governed with social obligations taking precedence over financial gain. The pricing policies must also be considered ethically, where individuals commonly use patent laws and intellectual property rights to amass personal wealth.

Conclusion

In an increasingly globalized society where many cultures meet through interaction or trade, utilizing various moral traditions like Dharma may help us meet the ethical demands posed by modern medicine. It is important to remember that practicing medicine requires technical skills and implies making the right choices based on morals to achieve balance throughout life's spheres as an eternal quest for peace continues unabated.

Integrating Dharma into medical ethics provides a comprehensive worldview dealing with complex healthcare systems worldwide. Dharma augments contemporary medical ethics by stressing duty, compassion, justice, and holistic health and deepening our understanding of life interdependence. Apart from providing good quality medical attention, healthcare providers should also work towards environmental justice, which will, in turn, bring about fairness among communities living together within a given area, hence leading to the establishment of fair societies.

The foundation of educational endeavors is the ethical behavior of all parties involved. To develop an individual's integrity, an educational ecosystem must foster communal trust in tests, assignments, studying, and research. Respect for one's own and other students' work is essential for promoting collaborative advancement and fortifying the academic community. A person is encouraged to lead a dedicated and moral life in the workplace by navigating the intersections of Dharma and professional ethics. This intricacy offers us direction in comprehending the intricacies of accountability, honesty, and empathy. A culture of virtue and righteousness will be promoted in the workplace by combining the convergence and divergence of both ideas.

Many young professionals are driven to help others regardless of their career choice. Medicine is one profession that demands this level of dedication. Professional ethics is a field that shows how to integrate spiritual values with intellectual and technical skills. According to modern standards, all professions should embrace morality and ethics as a way of life to nurture oneself and enhance interpersonal relationships and social norms. It ought to be followed as a spiritual and legal requirement.

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