The Impact of Abuse and Historical Perspective of Medical Ethics: A Moral Foundation for Human Research

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Background: Medical ethics play an increasingly important role in the practice of medicine and in medical research. Since the time of the Nuremberg trials, medical ethics has expanded and now it involves every aspect of medicine and research. There was no historical perspective of medical ethics in relation to medical and research abuse and to new development in the medical field.

Objective: A historical overview of the development of medical ethics, its response to recent medical advances and its relationship to the abuse of medical research.

Method: Electronic searches of the major databases and handsearching of relevant journals and publications to identify ethics guidelines appropriate for this study were conducted in March to May 2008. Guidelines were reviewed from Charles Babbage (1782-1871) till the advent of cloning. The dates of initiation of each guideline and the rationale for its development were recorded.

Result: Most of the medical ethic guidelines have evolved in response to the abuse of research, malpractice, and to discoveries or advances in medicine.

Overzealous physicians who were subservient to dictators or government of absolute power have contributed more than any other group to the abuse of research and consequently to the ethics. Next were those physicians who had little or no regard to patient or animal welfare.

Physicians and pharmaceutical companies who were driven by profit constitute the third group of abusers.

Scientific inaccuracy in publication, fraud, fabrication, falsification, plagiarism contributed to the abuse which sparked the development of ethical guidelines in research publication.

Conclusion: The majority of ethics guidelines have been developed in response to abuses in the practice of medicine, research, publication and recent advances in medicine.