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“Where do you come from?”
Ethics of Place

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- Does Place Matter?
- Does it have anything to offer in how we think about the provision of ethical health care in different settings?



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Overview

- Setting the stage
 - What is meant by place? Context of health care: rural vs. urban setting; Case
- Ethics Perspective
 - Why this obligation, what does it entail, how is it impacted by place
- Does Place Matter?



Setting the Stage

- What do we mean by place?
 - Geographic locale with certain physical characteristics





What do we mean by 'Place?'

- Power of place to shape who we are
- Place operates at level of persons, families, communities and societies
- In sum, 'place' is shorthand for a host of interacting factors that occur in specific geographic locations



Context of rural health care

1. Few primary and even fewer specialist practitioners
2. Limited resources
 - Gaps in mental health service, aged care, palliative care, major surgery, cancer care beyond chemotherapy, major trauma, dialysis, service for children with special needs
 - Lacking: occupational therapy, speech language therapy, physiotherapy



Context of rural health care

- 3. Confidentiality may be difficult to maintain
- 4. Family sensitive
 - Clinicians providing care to several members of same family
 - Family members are main care-givers for those who are ill
- 5. Community often provides financial support
- 6. Overlapping roles



Context of rural health care

- Strong community social context
- Services available in urban centres are rare or completely lacking
 - Requires much travel
- Give rise to ethical issues of a different nature




Setting the stage - Case

- Isabelle
- "Eve" ruling (1986)
- Home: town of 4800 people
- Closest city – 419 km (5 hr drive one way)



Ethics Perspectives

- Principles of bioethics
 - Respect for autonomy
 - Beneficence
 - Non-maleficence
 - Justice



Assumptions

- Autonomous subject:
 - Independent, self-interested and rational
- But how autonomous are we?
 - Social dimensions of personhood
 - Impact of structural (economic and social) opportunities on choice

Consider Place

- Could attention to place serve to identify morally relevant considerations that can be missed with traditional interpretations of principles?
- Do normative assumptions about individual autonomy, including confidentiality, make equal sense in rural vs. urban settings?



Consider place

- A physician may offer advice or counsel that is qualitatively different to a patient s/he knows well than to someone who is unknown
- Confidentiality may create tensions when provider knows decision made by patient will impact others (who are also his/her patients) significantly
- Strict individualistic interpretations of autonomy may affect important collaborative relationships that are key to care-giving



Reflecting on autonomy

- Individualistic and legal rights orientation to autonomy does not address:
 - Implications of a decision on an individual's relational well-being
 - Impact of the social dimensions of selfhood on autonomy and agency
 - Dependency is at the core of everyday life for cognitively disabled persons





Reflecting on best interests

- Defined in terms of non-interference and the right to reproduce
 - But are vulnerable individuals best served by a position that views the needs of dependent persons and their family providing care as separate or conflictual?
 - Do current approaches limit the types of questions that can be asked and how are these affected by place?



▪ Care giving requires:

- "...heeding the needs of another, putting aside one's own needs for someone more vulnerable and becoming intimate with the body and the bodily functions of the cared for...Because care involves a shift from one's own interests to those of the person in need of care, it often requires the caregiver to defer the fulfillment of his or her own needs."

--- Eva Kittay (2002, p. 291)



Reframing best interest

- To think about best interest in the context of dependency requires us to consider what is morally required of the carer, but also what is morally required to support the caregiver
- This will be affected by place



Reflecting on justice

- Disconnect between principles of Canada Health Act (universality and accessibility) and health care practice
- Social justice: recognizes that people are differently situated by class, age, disability, gender, place, etc
- *This in turn has an impact on opportunities, access and fairness*
- Are we perpetuating injustices if we do not attend to place and social context?



Does Place Matter?





Place-based approach

- Integrates an appreciation of places into our ethical decision-making
- Examines the ways in which place influences context for health experiences and decision-making
 - Requires that we take into account contextual knowledge of families
 - Involves an "active form of theorizing" (Hartrick et al. 2009)



Place-based approach *cont'd*

- Calls attention to social justice
 - Recognizes how people are differently situated and asks that these differences be taken into account when distributing social goods



Ethics of Place

- Can attention to place identify serve to identify morally relevant considerations that may be missed with our current approaches?





Ethics of rural health care

- Lack of confidentiality characterized as problematic
 - Yet, it is also what allows families and community to respond to and support those who are struggling
- Is it possible that confidentiality is open to different interpretations?


Ethics of rural health care

“Is healing simply the result of knowledge and technology? If so, a computer program might do as well or better than a physician, urban or rural. Or can there be a healing *relationship?*”

-- John Hardwig (2006)

Does Place Matter?

- Yes – it is one of a number of perspectives that can help enrich our understanding of ethics



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The Ethics of Place

Questions or comments...

