Ethics for International Medicine

Anji E. Wall

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The Complexity of International Medicine

International medicine is not a simple undertaking. Medical aid workers leave their homes and families to serve patients who are in dire need of medical care. They do this with limited resources, facilities, time, and help. Moreover, they work with patients and local medical personnel who speak different languages, have different cultures, adhere to different laws, and even have different understandings of medicine. It should not be a surprise that these circumstances contribute to and create both medical and ethical challenges.

Not only is the context of international medicine different from that of Western biomedicine in general, but the context of every international medical mission is unique, creating diverse ethical issues. For example, short-term surgical aid workers have to consider the necessity, risks, and benefits of their interventions, as well as the capability of local medical personnel to care for postoperative patients, while medical aid workers in war zones are often confronted with threats to their own safety, as well as decisions about which patients to treat, given limited resources and facilities. While each medical aid experience brings its own context and challenges, medical aid workers can be sure that they will encounter ethical issues and can use the case analysis method in this book to identify, analyze, and address these issues.

Practical Use of the Case Methodology

While the cases in this book highlight common ethical issues in international medicine, they cannot illustrate every ethical issue that medical aid workers might encounter. This is why understanding the rationale behind the methodology and how to apply it in a wide variety of cases is essential for all medical aid workers. When medical aid workers recognize that an ethical issue has arisen or is likely to arise, they should immediately start analyzing the situation, using the essential elements of
ethical issues in international medicine as a guide. While the analysis questions are a helpful road map, every question may not be necessary in every situation (for example, asking a boy who has just broken his leg what effect this has had on his life). Medical aid workers may also find they need to ask additional questions to better understand the situation. Therefore, the case analysis questions should be used as a guide, along with the clinical judgment of the medical aid worker, in the assessing ethical issues.

It is also important for medical aid workers to remember that cases evolve over time. Medical facts can change, different options for intervention can become possible, and new stakeholders can enter into a case. As situations evolve, medical aid workers and other stakeholders should reassess ethical issues to determine if anything has changed and if these changes affect their options or the justification of their options.

**Preparation and Reflection**

Beyond using this methodology during international experiences, medical aid workers can use it for both preparation and reflection. Just as medical aid workers can prepare to address the medical problems they will encounter in developing countries, they can also prepare for the ethical issues they are likely to encounter. Medical aid workers can ask those who have worked in the area before them about any ethical issues that they encountered and how these were addressed. They can also learn about the culture of the patients they will be serving so as to identify potential areas of disagreement. In addition, they can find out about the facilities and resources that will be available to them so as to prepare for the limitations they are likely to encounter. By preparing for potential ethical issues, medical aid workers will be in a position to identify these issues early and address them before they grow into more serious problems.

After their international experiences, medical aid workers can use the case method to review their approach to the ethical issues that they encountered. In doing so, they should identify areas for improvement and determine if they missed any key elements during their analysis so as to improve their approach in future cases. Reflection is especially important after emergent cases in which medical aid workers do not have time to go through a thorough analysis. It allows them to revisit the situa-
tion without time constrains and create a plan for how to address similar situations in the future.

**A Note on Organizational Structure**

Medical providers who are considering doing an international medical experience have a variety of choices with respect to medical aid organizations. It is important that they make an informed decision about their aid group, because organizational structure can have a role in creating or contributing to ethical issues. Organizational approaches to providing aid, measuring success, and interacting with the existing health care infrastructure vary. For example, some organizations focus on directly providing medical aid, while others focus on preventive care, while still others focus on training local medical personnel. If medical aid workers choose organizations with models that are in line with their goals and share their values, there is a lower probability that ethical issues will arise between medical aid workers and their organizations.

One organizational aspect of international medicine that medical aid workers should consider is how they will receive information about the area where they will be serving and the patients they will be taking care of. Good patient care requires continuity, accurate record-keeping, and strong communication among providers. For medical organizations to provide high-quality care, they should have an infrastructure in place to track the patients whom their aid workers care for and to encourage continuity from one aid worker or aid group to the next. This way, the organization can ensure that medical aid workers are not starting from scratch each time there is a transition. Not only will this allow medical aid workers to provide better care for patients, but it will also allow them to learn about the ethical issues that previous groups have encountered, thus enabling them to prepare to address similar situations and work toward avoiding them.

**The Promise of International Medicine**

Recognizing that ethical issues are prevalent in the practice of international medicine should not discourage medical aid workers from these experiences, but rather they should see this as an opportunity to improve the care of patients. If medical aid workers pretend that ethical issues do not arise, or ignore them when they occur, they are doing a disservice to
themselves and to their patients. Medicine is a human endeavor bathed in a context of suffering, disability, and death. When limited resources, time, facilities, and vast differences between providers and patients are added to this context, ethical issues are certain to occur. Medical aid workers should embrace all of the challenges of international medicine, including the ethical issues, in order to provide the best care that they can for their patients.