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## MEDICAL ETHICS –AN AYURVEDA VIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Medicine and its ethics have been running concurrently ever since their origin, albeit ethics were in subtle status, to be appropriated only by few. Medical ethics as a separate topic is specifically emphasized in later half twentieth century, it cannot be appreciated if isolated from other aspects of ethics i.e. Social, religious etc. as well these influence human behavior which in turn effects health thus life. *Ayurveda* is the first systematically written record of medicine of the world incorporating all aspects of human life. *Ayurveda* deals with the advantageous/beneficial, disadvantageous / non-beneficial, happy and unhappy life, its wholesome /promoters, unwholesome /non-promoters, measurement of life and life (*Atman*) itself. The entire subjects of medical ethics are intricately interwoven with other aspects of health and given ethical points are mentioned in *Ayurveda* needs to be understand. With this objective, here a sincere effort has been made to review the ethical issues related to medical practice by gathering information from *Ayurveda* classics.

**Key words:** *Ayurveda*, Ethics, *Sadvritta*, *Vaidya*.

## Introduction

Ethics is a branch of philosophy dealing with moral aspects of human behavior. Ethics in Greek means habit, action, behavior which encompasses theories and principles of values along with their basic perception and justification. In Latin, the Ethics refers to customs and normative behavior of people or society. Medical ethics in normal sense refers to guide-lines generally written by physician about ideal relationship of physician to his peers and patient. Modern medical ethics as a separate field started developing in 1950's, in which informing the patient obtaining informed consent and making the patient as an active partner in decision making about the matters related to him are included. When a patient refuses to take blood transfusion or any other life-saving treatment, this causes dilemma about the duties of the patient. But the Indian society with its ancient and diverse cultures and traditions is deeply ingrained with concept of *Parampara*(tradition), *Dharma* (virtue, religion), *KarmaSamskara* and *Punarjanma*, which do not permit the negligence persons for refusal for treatment. These are all in Ayurveda described elaborately, in this article we tried to quote some relevant ethics which have high impacts in all walks of life even today are discussed under the headings of Social ethics, qualities and ethics of a *Vaidya*(Physician) and ethics of treatment by gathering information from Ayurvedic literature .

**Social ethics:** The person observing high social ethics naturally gains respectability

in society influencing his/her overall personality and psychological health. Social ethics have been explained in the characters of beneficial life (*Hitaayu*) and codes of good conducts (*Sadvritta*) in *Ayurveda*. Good conducts or *Sadvrittas* are the promoters of psychosomatic health. The person of following qualities is said to be having beneficial life or *Hitaayui.e.* Well-wisher to all creatures, truthful, acting only after thoroughly examining the situation, very careful observer of virtue, wealth and enjoyment without their mutual conflict, devoted to knowledge and scientific understanding and caring /serving elderly persons<sup>1</sup>. *Sadvrittas* or Good conducts are described mainly under two broad groups i.e. Do's and don'ts, siezable points of both these influence one's social status or social ethics are as follows: Do's (To be done)- one should adopt only such means to earn livelihood which are not contrary to *dharma*(virtuous path), should follow the path of peace and be busy in studies<sup>2</sup> . One can adopt any means of livelihood not despised by good men<sup>3</sup>. Should always assiduously follow the path of celibacy, knowledge, charity, friendship, compassion, happiness, indifference and peace<sup>4</sup>.

One should always have mercy/compassion for those frustrated from life, having crossed the limits of dignity/decorum, ignorant and having given-up path of virtue. Should always speak virtuous, meaningful, pleasing, factual, temperate and beneficial words / sentences and always beneficial mode of

life prescribed by sages should be practiced<sup>5</sup>. One should always become benefactor even to those who harm or do disservice to him and respect all the sects equally or adopt medium path for all religions<sup>6</sup>. Relevant Don'ts are – For maintaining one's high social status following acts are prohibited - Should not tell lies, however if it is essential to save one's health or life such as giving meat of crow or vulture etc, carnivorous birds to a patient of *Rajyakshma* by telling that it is meat of peacock or partridge is not unethical as the meat of crow or vulture etc. is life saving but patient may not agree to accept, however knowing it to be of partridge etc. he takes those, one should not be disclosure other's weakness/defects nor should attempt to know secrets of others. Neither one should not give up traditional practices nor should break any rule of society/family. Should not take-up anything without examining it properly<sup>4</sup>. Those who observe these do's and don'ts of code of conduct is praised by all, Gods protect him, lives for more than hundred years, besides longevity he also attains disease – free state or health, grandeur and fame<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Qualities and ethics of Vaidya (Physician):**

According to Ayurveda the structure of treatment rests on four strong pillars i.e. the *Bhishag* (Vaidya/physician), the drug, the attendant and the patient. Amongst these the *vaidya* is the main or principal support<sup>8</sup>. The qualities of *Vaidya* enumerated as – Vaidya should have excellence in theoretical knowledge acquired by listening to the learned Vaidya's. He should have extensive practical experience,

dexterity, cleanliness /purity/skill. He should Possession of all needed equipments. He Should have knowledge of human constitution and course of action. The physician who possesses six qualities i.e. learning, rational approach, insight into allied sciences, memory, promptness and appropriate timely action is considered as honorable *vaidya*, to him nothing is unachievable<sup>9</sup>. Apart from this *Vaidya* /physician, there is also description of qualities of Surgeon(*Shalyahartra*)<sup>10</sup>, qualities of Birth attendant<sup>11</sup>, Qualities of wet nurse (*Dhaatri*)<sup>12</sup>, qualities of child's attendant (*Kumaaradhara*)<sup>13</sup> and even patient's attendant<sup>14</sup>. Disciplines/attitudes of a *Vaidya* is also described as - friendliness and also compassion towards the diseased, deep concern for those likely to be cured, indifference to those advancing towards death<sup>15</sup>. There is also mentioning of not accept the anything from a poor patient – one should not take cereals, food, drinks or money from a patient and it is better to die by using snake – venom or getting burnt in fire rather than taking money or other usable from a poor or misery patient<sup>16</sup>. This shows the ethical medical practice in those days. Ethics of *Vaidya* - The *Vaidya* should consider his patients like own sons and protect them sincerely from all the trouble/miseries, wishing excellent piety or remembering his own knowledge and virtue<sup>17</sup>. The *Vaidya* should have brotherly feelings for everyone, especially to the patient<sup>18</sup> and the *Vaidya* should treat /care the orphans/helpless patients like own son. The *Vaidya* should always treat the patients with respect, disrespect takes away life of the patient and fame of the

Vaidya<sup>19</sup>. The Vaidya should never disclose the impending death of the patient to his kinsmen<sup>20</sup>.

#### **Ethics of treatment:**

The aim of the treatment is prescribed for the purpose of uninterrupted growth and development of the body and longevity as-well-as elimination of disorders <sup>21</sup>and the therapy is administered with the aim to use preventive measures or avoid causative factors producing disequilibrium of *dhatu*s, to maintain their equilibrium by appropriate methods and also to promote the *dhatu*s which are already in equilibrium <sup>22</sup>. It is clear from these descriptions that in Ayurveda, if not more at least equal emphasis is given on preventive/promotive medicine also.

The treatment given as charity is just like giving food to hungry and water to thirsty, those who perform all these three (giving food, water and treatment) go to heaven even without performing *yajna*<sup>23</sup>. And the ideal /correct treatment is that which while pacifying a disorder does not excite/produce another one, while that which though pacifies one disorders, yet at the same time gives rise to another one is not correct<sup>24&25</sup>. This points are very much relevant in to-days scenario of treatment.

The *vaidya* must examine the patient with all possible theories like *Sarvatantrasiddhanta* (universal theory), *pratitantrasiddhanta*(restricted theory), *adhikaranasiddhanta*(implied theory) and *abhupagamasiddhanta*(hypothetical theory), to arrive at definite conclusions, established by scientists after testing it in several ways and proving it with reasoning<sup>26</sup>. The expert /skilled person always act after careful examination of

entire situation <sup>27</sup>. These are very much pertinent in present day medical practice.

**Ethics for drug use:** Drug unknown by its name, features form or properties becomes fatal like poison, fire or thunder bolt, thus, unknown drug should never use <sup>28</sup>. Through the known drug is like ambrosia. Yet, if improperly used produces complications<sup>29</sup>. Drugs like nectar administered by ignorant become like weapon, thunder bolt or poison, thus one should avoid the ignorant *Vaidya*<sup>30</sup>.

**Home –visits by Vaidya:** The Vaidya should not enter patient's house without being called, and having entered should observe the main purpose, should not see all around except the patient<sup>31</sup>. A wise Vaidya should not visit a patient at evening, twilights, and night, at the time of bath or meals or other unfavorable time. Should not sleep and eat at patient's house, nor should visit him without being called to do so <sup>32</sup>.

**Permission for treatment:** After completion of study with the permission of his teacher the disciple should go in the field <sup>31</sup>. Even this is relevant today as qualified doctor should get register to practice in state boards.

**Joint consultation:** Consultation with group of *Vaidyas* removes doubts/confusion<sup>33</sup>and *Vaidya* should not enter into controversy with other *Vaidyas* , should advise treatment with collective opinion<sup>31</sup>. This indicates multidisciplinary and poly clinic concept.

**Emergency management:** in case of emergency routine procedure/treatment should not be applied by a *Vaidya*, rather quick reaction and action should be there as his own house is on fire <sup>34</sup>.

### Treatment after determining curability or incurability of diseases:

The physician after determining curability or incurability of the disease, then proceeding with treatment in time, after thorough knowledge certainly succeeds<sup>35</sup> and the treatment should be continued till the last breath because sometimes even after appearance of bad prognostic features the patient survives by luck /God's grace<sup>36</sup>.

### Discussion

Ayurvedicethics can be comparable with medical ethics. Values in medical ethics

- Autonomy – it denotes that the patient has the right to refuse or choose their treatment. At times when patient refuses life saving treatment says blood transfusion it creates a dilemma. In earlier days instead of autonomy it was paternalism in which physician used to choose the treatment.
- Beneficence –it denotes that the practitioner should act in the best interest of the patient. Very high importance to this aspect was given which is elaborated under ethics of *Vaidya* and also treatment.
- Non-Maleficence – The concept of non-maleficence is embodied in phrase first, do no harm. Advice to treat the patient like kith and kin or family member embodies this idea.
- Euthanasia- it is not referred in Ayurveda, as atman is considered a part of *paramatman* i.e. God, and it leaves the body according to one's own deeds only.
- Informed consent- consent from guardian etc, was taken before surgical procedure or dealing with obstructed labor albeit or his/her family.
- Confidentiality – under *don'ts*very clearly mentioned that the *Vaidya* should not

disclose anything concerning patient or his/her family.

- Importance of communication – The *Vaidya* is advised to give full information about patient's condition to a family members, however graveness etc,. is not told to the patient.
- Truth telling – patient's exact condition was advised to be told to the family but not to the patient.
- Conflict of interest – interest of patient was highest priority, under no circumstances the *Vaidya* was advised to cause any act detrimental to patient.
- Referral – the cases were referred to specialists for treatment as and when needed.
- Vender relationship – Now a day's doctors are influenced by drug company inducements. Any type of greed or act detrimental to patient was totally contraindicated.
- Sexual relationship – The jokes or talks with the women of patient's family is enlisted under *do nots* for *Vaidya*.
- Futility – advice not to treat incurable patient and treatment up to last breath insinuates that if condition is not reversible very exhaustive and costly treatment should not be done, however the patient should treated with ordinary drugs with the hope of God's miracle.

### Conclusion

It is evident from preceding description that important / major points concerning physician, physician-patient relationship, duties of a physician etc, all ethical points related to treatment are discussed in Ayurvedic classics , beside , emphasis on social ethics is also given to make the physician a good citizen. Other points of

proforma were probably not considered relevant in prevailing circumstances of those days due to very compact and well-knit social structure, dominance of king, as –well-as deeply imbibed fear in psyche for being punished by God in case of any misconduct.

Today Ayurveda world has changed and adopted in time to current practices various norms and regulations as per guidelines given by National Commission for Indian Systems of Medicine (NCISM), previously was known as Central Council for Indian Medicine(CCIM)

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