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Engineering Solutions for Ethical Dilemmas in Healthcare

Abdullahi Abdirahim Bashiir

Faculty of Engineering Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

The convergence of engineering and healthcare has significantly advanced diagnostic and therapeutic technologies, yet it has also introduced a complex landscape of ethical dilemmas. As bioethical debates intensify around topics such as end-of-life care, data privacy, equitable access, and medical device safety, engineers are increasingly called upon to address moral concerns traditionally reserved for clinicians and ethicists. This paper examinees how engineering design and decision-making can integrate ethical frameworks to resolve moral conflicts in healthcare delivery. It investigates systemic approaches, including the adaptation of the Four Box Model with systems thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and stakeholder-inclusive ethical evaluation. Case studies demonstrate how ethical issues manifest in technology development and implementation, from personal integrity and clinical autonomy to regulatory responsibility and social equity. The paper advocates for embedding ethics into the engineering design process and proposes best practices for training ethically literate engineers capable of navigating the intricacies of healthcare systems. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, engineering can serve as a proactive force in ensuring health technologies are not only effective but also just, inclusive, and aligned with fundamental ethical principles.

Keywords: Engineering Ethics, Healthcare Technology, Ethical Decision-Making, Interdisciplinary Ethics, Medical Devices, Bioethics, Stakeholder Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The growing interest in bioethical matters is driven by public debates and demands for laws on issues like stem-cell research, life prolongation, euthanasia, and the rights of the unborn. This has led to calls for moral accountability from the medical community on medical ethics. To address ethical dilemmas faced by healthcare professionals, public policy must align with fundamental ethical principles, permitting transparency in 'deontological decisions' affecting medical norms. However, public discourse, often marred by moral panic, complicates the formulation of effective medical ethics, restricting open discussion in healthcare settings. This raises the crucial question of how to reconcile the widening gap between public ethical concerns and the medical community's commentary. Globally, healthcare systems are experiencing crises due to dwindling resources and shifts in public perception. Countries are seeking ways to validate their healthcare systems' efficacy and legitimacy concerning health outcomes, as societal progress is often tied to improvements in healthcare. Additionally, the rapid rise of sophisticated technologies presents shared challenges across healthcare systems, where the boundaries of legal and ethical acceptability may hinder progress. Cultural and institutional variations further complicate discourse on matters like stem-cell interventions and treatment rights, impacting the coherence of discussions beyond national borders [1, 2].

The Role of Engineering in Healthcare

Healthcare systems have traditionally depended on isolated health professionals, addressing clinical dilemmas through peer consultations and ethics committees that include representatives from various fields. Recent debates highlight the moral and ethical challenges posed by complex technologies in disease diagnosis and treatment, prompting engineers to engage in ethical discussions. As societies increasingly rely on medical technologies designed by engineers, their design choices significantly influence moral decisions in clinical practice, including equitable healthcare delivery. Unintended features can lead to

deadlock situations that might have been averted through proactive efforts. The ongoing discourse emphasizes that engineers' involvement in ethical decisions must be conscious and responsible. However, critics argue that engineers lack the necessary training for such discussions, influenced by the historical belief that they are inherently moral beings capable of navigating ethical challenges. The engineering field itself faces moral dilemmas, often overshadowed by the recognition of ethical issues within the medical profession, particularly regarding the use of health technologies. This gap in moral responsibility raises concerns about the accountability of engineers in the development and use of medical equipment, like MRI scanners and stents, often overlooked in ethical debates [3, 4].

Frameworks for Ethical Decision Making

Discussions on ethical principles in decision-making and priority-setting frameworks are crucial for daily healthcare delivery, gaining renewed focus during public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. Evaluating ethical justifications can bolster responses to emergent challenges, acknowledging the complex systems affecting decision-makers. Modules addressing the dental profession's challenges can enhance ethical consistency and trust. Adapting the Four Box Model to dentistry can aid clinicians, yet it doesn't capture the entire context. A solutions-oriented Four Box Model that incorporates systems thinking and social determinants is necessary. Ethics should extend beyond mere deliberation; a systems-oriented framework is required, incorporating five key dental ethics principles and emphasizing core ethical commitments. This framework integrates deontological and utilitarian ethical theories, fostering critical reasoning about individual, interpersonal, organizational, and professional contexts. By expanding the Four Box Model's four domains, it addresses patient and practitioner-centered health concerns, considering factors impacting patient preferences and quality of life. This adaptation emphasizes that no single domain dominates ethical decision-making; all require careful consideration. Additionally, the revised Four Box Model provides specific questions for ethical decision-making [5, 6].

Case Studies of Ethical Dilemmas

From ethical codes and policy guidelines to collaborative practices, various frameworks are available to address ethical dilemmas in healthcare. Even though these guidelines usually work well in providing the basic ethical care, the real-world practice can be much more complicated than expected. In reality, the ethical analysis requires collaboration, discussions, negotiations, and communication among various stakeholders such as healthcare providers, patients, and caregivers when making decisions. Due to this complexity, ethical dilemmas are often found among healthcare professionals as well as healthcare students. This study examines ethical issues and dilemmas broadly in the healthcare practice and suggests an engineering ethics framework by addressing several ethical dilemmas. Three healthcare engineering case studies have been discussed at the engineering ethics forum. Ethics in a non-health engineering context does help bring out some understanding on the understanding about ethical issues, but the medical context in healthcare engineering has a much more complicated and subtle nature. All of these three cases bear multiple ethnic issues not only on the person's integrity, but also on the interpersonal ethics, organizational conduct, and broader societal/macro-level health care policies. From the technological perspectives, engineering ethics situations can take on different forms: technical dilemmas associated with the ethical use of computing measurement and bioengineering technologies; organizational dilemmas regarding the responsibilities of the engineers; personal dilemmas on issues of integrity; and broader social dilemmas regarding the ethical import of having engineering decisions, interpretations and action [7, 8].

Technological Innovations in Healthcare

Healthcare holds a unique position in engineering ethics as it deals directly with the lives of individuals. Issues in this area are often life and death dilemmas as healthcare engineers design new technologies to improve diagnoses and treatment of diseases. Complex ethical issues arise around the design of medical devices and technology in digital health. Issues arise from a wide range of stakeholders in healthcare including patients who must choose whether to adopt new technology or devices for themselves or their children, physicians or providers who evaluate new devices or recommend their use to patients, medical device companies who develop new devices, regulatory bodies who evaluate devices for safety and efficacy, hospitals that purchase and implement new technologies, payers that evaluate the cost effectiveness of devices they will cover, and the general public whose access to devices and technologies may shape overall health. The number and types of stakeholders involved in healthcare can create a complex web of interactions, leading to an increased potential for ethical dilemmas to emerge. When considering the ethical implications of medical device development, it is important to adopt a broad view of the stakeholders involved in the design, creation, implementation, use, and regulation of devices. The design stage of medical devices involves a large number of stakeholders from the medical device industry. Engineering and regulatory considerations drive much of the medical device design process due to the

promise of prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases that these technologies hold. However, there is a corresponding promise that devices will also create health benefits for end users: patients, physicians, and hospitals. Since devices are developed to provide health benefits, it is reasonable to view health as a design constraint that must be satisfied through the design process [9, 10].

Engineering Ethics in Medical Technology

Unfamiliar high-level ethics principles such as autonomy, beneficence, and risk may be espoused by current efforts in ethics education. Such principles will be unfamiliar to the engineers and scientists who develop emerging DMDs, and it will be up to them to translate these principles into specific, actionable, lower-level principles that they can incorporate into their day-to-day decision-making. This translation may be difficult for engineers and scientists who have little to no training in ethics, and such training will require proficiency in applying general ethical principles to real-world ethical issues faced during the DMD lifecycle, such as clinical trial participant recruitment, consumer data privacy, and risk allocation between developers and healthcare institutions. Achieving this proficiency will require intensive ethical training over a sustained period, an upfront investment that cuts across the norm of targeting most ethics-related investment far away from the DMD design and development timeframes. It may also require upfront investments in ethical analysis approaches that could be programmed into DMDs to impart basic ethical behaviors during clinical use, expanding on existing research regarding ethically aware robots and software. Multiple compound medical device mishaps, subsequent regulatory actions, and recalls have received relatively high levels of media coverage in the last five years. Such coverage has incited investigators to raise awareness of ethical concerns on a societal level, as well as approaches to raise awareness of ethical concerns for engineers and scientists involved in the design and development of medical technologies broadly. In the former space, conferences and workshops have been held, papers published, and investigations conducted. In the latter space, many top-tier universities now cover ethics in their medical device-related technical curricula. There are ongoing regulatory efforts in health technology design and development. For example, an effort by the IEEE Industry Standards and Technology Organization attempts to build a framework of ethical principles specific to health technologies and the technical development thereof. This principled frame could be forwarded to efforts in curricula development for engineers and scientists working on emerging DMDs [11, 12].

Stakeholder Perspectives

An ethical framework is pivotal in envisaging, creating, and delivering solutions for defined ethical dilemmas. The ethical considerations influencing the process of defining, creating, and delivering solutions require analysis from stakeholder perspectives. In this case study, perspectives from the University of Southampton ethics committee, hospital executives at an NHS trust, department heads addressing operational management, systems engineers conceiving a mobile app, and NHS patients in line for surgery were assessed. The analysis was tripartite: one representation was created from each group of stakeholder perspectives, which were compared to one another and then compared to Engel's ethical framework for engineering. The board of directors of the winning institution was then presented with a duty to think and arguments as to why they should or should not fund and develop the mobile app. Matters of system availability and to whom it is available raised issues of equity, fairness, and safety. These issues were represented and critiques offered that sought to identify and address trade-offs, which Engel labelled, respectively, a requirement on equity, fairness, and safety, and two fulfilment questions regarding ethical compliance. The distinction was raised between pre-process question discipline, which can be assessed fully prior to execution, and ongoing-process questions relating to observations made in implementation. Embedding ethical considerations within engineering processes rather than affording a 'yes or no' permission process was examined. The argument requires the establishment of a collaborative effort involving healthcare managers, logistics experts, and system designers to ensure that the ethical behaviour of any solutions to be proposed is demanded and assessed throughout the design process. A collaborative effort such as this has been shown to reveal problems overlooked by any singular stakeholder group acting alone. System design is too important a process for stakeholders other than designers to avoid, and the ethics of the design process itself cannot be ignored by designers; it also needs to be proactive [13, 14].

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Ethical Dilemmas

The inter-professional ethics education in health care is a relatively new area of educational innovation, aimed at addressing the range of ethical issues that arise in the interface of multidisciplinary teams working in a patient's best interest. As teams become ever more diverse, interdisciplinary ethics education will be a developing topic in the inter-professional education agenda at local, national, and international levels. In this paper, a framework to address interdisciplinary ethics education is considered. Multi-disciplinary teams need to work together to approach ethically complex issues. This paper aims to start

consideration of the debate on ethics between both discipline groups and between groups that are far apart in professional training. Given the complexity of professional disciplines involved with the patient, it is necessary to draw on principles of equity and subjectivity when considering the professional duties associated with a case. Making different professional backgrounds apparent helps frame the discussion, and the paper reviews an approach to begin this debate process. It does not intend to give an exhaustive overview of the ethics and philosophy relevant to this area, nor is it intended that the approach described is universally applicable. What is put forward is simply a process to initiate discussion and illustrate the complexity of the ethically charged situations that occur in patient care. Should similar exercises be undertaken by professional groups, or should one professional group educate others in the rules of engagement? As a start, it is suggested that a case be presented with anonymised patient details and with details of both disciplines that were involved in the care of the patient. The opinions of both disciplines should then be laid on the table, and differences in each group's views should be highlighted. Both disciplines should present these opinions anonymously to the larger group of both disciplines involved in care (without appointment to individuals). Then the discussion should begin about these differences of opinion, firstly internally in multi-disciplinary groups, and then together as a larger single group. As a start, it is purposefully left as a work undone [15, 16].

Emerging Ethical Challenges

Healthcare ethics is undergoing profound change in thought and practice. These changes and the related ethical issues, which affect all health care practitioners, their patients, and the overall community, are multi-directional and difficult to pin down. Client care has been a traditional focus of health care ethics, as this was where ethical conflicts typically raised their heads. In recent years, however, the focus has been reoriented and broadened, so that health care ethics is seen more as a faculty group that considers, monitors, and advises on all ethical matters related to health care, provider or client, institutional or community, or broader. Nonetheless, this new and broader conception of health care ethics has much deeper implications for traditional health care ethics. A major one is the loss of autonomy in the client-care realm, over decisions regarding client care for which the ethics committee is the final arbiter in conflict resolution. The dimension of personal trust has also been challenged, for health care practitioners may be compelled to set aside or even betray deeply held moral beliefs, in deference to institutional or centre guidelines. Several new ethical dilemmas are presented, many, indeed, from unexpected new perspectives, by the general public's ever-broadening and ever-increasing access to health care. The main objects of professional expertise in health care ethics: competing interests in systems of public moral control and how care is delivered. These day-to-day abstract system ethics create their own directly impacting problems, many yet unperceived in their entirety, at individual institutional and community levels, and thus fundamentally limit the abilities of health care ethics well-trained in conventional ethics to cope with the new demands. Health care ethics sets out a conceptual framework for understanding systems ethics, the new kind of moral consideration neither considered nor permitted by the corporatization of health care ethics. It describes the capabilities of systems ethics by differentiating abstract from personal versus collective institutional ethics. It elaborates a series of new potential dilemmas, many yet unrecognized, placed on health care ethics by emerging public attention to health care systems ethics. It scrutinizes the implications of these dilemmas for health care ethics in practice, apart from any remedial efforts to curb the issue through relapsing into institutional development ethics. In particular, the nature and significance of knowledge in clinically related ethics, which is often overlooked, are explored, including aspects of absolute commands vs. rational considerations, of uncertainty, negotiation, and practices, as well as the latter's implications for professional engagement [17, 18].

Best Practices for Ethical Engineering in Healthcare

Best practices for an ethical engineering process in healthcare solutions emphasize the integration of health and ethical concerns. Ethical dilemmas in healthcare can be analyzed through properties, agent tasks, and desired outcomes. Addressing these dilemmas requires screening, morality negotiation, and forecasting. An increasing number of engineers in the European Union are responding to health sector demands; however, many apply existing AI techniques without sufficient consideration of the complexities involved. For engineering efforts to be successful and ethical, a thorough understanding of the problems, solution facets, and their broader contexts is crucial. Ethical dilemmas arise from differing views on healthcare properties, agent tasks, and decisions, highlighting the importance of clearly defining the healthcare needs and the necessary properties of technology. Ethical healthcare engineering must derive the ethical issues from these properties, resulting in a comprehensive design addressing the tasks intended to meet health needs. This design involves computations leading to desired states, necessitating detailed screening of the healthcare solution's application by relevant agencies. Although it may seem

straightforward, accurately identifying healthcare needs and the required properties in appropriate terminology is complex. Screening employs a two-pronged disproof approach: one method tests properties or agent assignments through disproof (bottom-up) and the other outlines potential non-obtaining solutions (top-down), both essential for understanding and addressing ethical healthcare engineering challenges [19, 20].

Future Directions in Ethical Engineering Solutions

Engineering solutions to healthcare ethical dilemmas introduce numerous challenges and opportunities. While the desire to solve problems is essential, defining problems and setting contexts are vital for successful projects. Successful collaborations across disciplines, particularly with ethics experts, are crucial. A key question is whether ethical reasoning can integrate with mathematical or programming algorithms. Normative ethics has predominantly been qualitative or mathematical; if the latter is superior, it must include multiple-objective programming formulations rooted in simple, fuzzy, and interval-valued utilities. Essential normative issues in deploying engineered algorithms for ethical decisions include objectivity versus subjectivity, certainty versus uncertainty, accountability versus acceptability, and general versus inequitable welfare distribution. This requires deliberative evaluations, thought experiments, and real-life case applications to explore all consequences. Alongside an engineering and ethics team, broader governance participation is essential. Surprisingly, the healthcare community has largely neglected engineering-assisted ethical decision-making, overlooked by both engineering and ethics disciplines. Clinical expertise was acknowledged, while ethically challenging procedures, like using electric shocks on mentally challenged patients without leaving evidence, raise ethical queries. Can such technology be ethically overturned? A human-agent programming algorithm and an ethics pipeline could potentially be developed to explore new scenarios, such as automated conversations. However, the adoption rate for engineered ethical decision-making tools remains low, around zero to five percent for specific issues [21-27].

CONCLUSION

Ethical dilemmas in healthcare are no longer confined to the clinical domain; they are increasingly shaped and influenced by engineering decisions. As medical technologies evolve, so too must our understanding of the ethical frameworks guiding their development and deployment. This paper underscores the urgency of integrating ethical reasoning into engineering education, regulatory practice, and technological design processes. By fostering collaboration between engineers, healthcare professionals, ethicists, and patients, a holistic approach to resolving ethical conflicts can emerge—one that balances innovation with compassion, efficiency with equity, and technical advancement with human dignity. Ultimately, embedding ethics into engineering processes ensures that technology enhances rather than compromises the values at the heart of healthcare.

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