ABSTRACT

The ethical issue of justification has become an urgent challenge in medical imaging. There has been a shift in emphasis in the discussion: from what has been regarded as a rather paternalistic attitude of practitioners to one which stresses the rights of the individual patients. Since my contribution is meant to be a philosophical one, rather than scientific or medical, my concern here is to reflect on this current move on the part of the profession by offering certain philosophical considerations which are relevant to the present discussion on this topic.

I will discuss what is involved in the ethical task and its challenges and in the search for ethical justification. My main aim in this paper is to remind us of the need, and to stress the importance, of ‘looking behind the image’ by examining closely some of the ethical issues which arise from the practice of medical imaging.

INTRODUCTION

There has been some move on the part of the medical and scientific professions to focus on the issue of justification as it applies to them (Malone 2008). This gathering, as well as similar ones in the past, attests to this. The move appears to be in the form of a shift in emphasis: from what has been regarded as a rather paternalistic attitude of practitioners to one which stresses the rights of the individual patients. There are several implications, some of which have already been noted elsewhere (Wikman-Svahn, n.d.) (Hansson 2007) (Binchy 2008). Since my contribution to

1 Jim Malone, in ‘New Ethical Issues for Radiation Protection in Diagnostic Radiology’, refers to the need for the development of what he calls the fundamental ethical basis for the practices in radiology given a period of changing social attitudes. Reporting on the SENTINEL Dublin Workshop, he identified, among others, several ethical issues revolving around justification which arose in the discussions but which deserve further consideration. In this context, he welcomes the contribution that a philosophical perspective can make to the discussions, noting that such a contribution would take the form of identifying and articulating the arguments for and against particular ethical positions. Cf. J.F. Malone (ed.), Proceedings of the Workshop on Radiation Protection in Medicine. Special Issue of Radiat. Protect. Dos (2008).

2 In his paper ‘The Ethical Foundation of Radiation Protection – from Utilitarianism to an Individual-oriented Philosophy’ Per Wikman-Svahn observes that present radiation practices are essentially based on the application of the ALARA principle, which he maintains is commonly
This conference is meant to be a philosophical one, rather than scientific or medical, my concern here is to reflect on this current move on the part of the professions by offering certain ethical considerations which are relevant to the present discussion on this topic. My main aim is to encourage us to ‘look behind the image’, as it were.

**SOME CLARIFICATIONS REGARDING ETHICS**

But let me, at the outset, introduce some clarification regarding ethics itself. The first point that I want to state and clarify is that ethics and ethical conduct are much more than merely following an agreed way of behaving – the impression one gets from all the talk about the need for ethics in various areas or fields. Having a code of conduct is of course important and essential, but it would be misleading to think that ‘ethics’ or ‘ethical decision/judgment’ is merely a matter of ‘going by the book’, as it were. That is what makes discussions regarding ethical issues, be they in radiology or in any other areas, so complicated and so seemingly inconclusive.

Believed to be founded on the ethical tradition of utilitarianism. Commenting on the approach taken by ICRP, he writes further that the proposed changes to the radiation protection system shifts the emphasis from the ALARA-principle to a principle of individual exposure-limitation. This means, in his view, that the ethical discussion moves more to a consideration of the rights of the individual. Cf. Feltz and Eggermont (eds.), *Ethics and Radiological Protection* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, n.d.).

Sven Ove Hansson in ‘Ethics and Radiation Protection’ makes a similar observation. While admitting that radiological protection and moral philosophy differ in many respects, he nevertheless claims an important and mutually beneficial dialogue that could exist between these two disciplines. He advances the view that ‘some of the major problems in radiation protection are strongly connected with those that moral philosophers have worked with since antiquity.’ He singles out what he calls ‘the problem of combining respect for individual rights with the furthering of collective interests’. *Journal of Radiological Protection*, 27 (2007), 147–156.

Addressing the subject of justification of medical exposure, William Binchy notes that the *Medical Exposure Directive* assigns a prominent place to this issue. Furthermore, he observes that this document directs us to the broader philosophical, ethical and social contexts of the discussion on justification. Turning to the justification principle, he focuses on the term ‘a sufficient net benefit’ used in this document. He explains that this criterion attempts ‘to weigh the total potential diagnostic or therapeutic benefits to the individual and to society against the possible individual detriment to the individual while taking into account the alternatives’. He compares this criterion to the ‘felicific calculus’ of utilitarianism ‘in which individual welfare is subsumed into a social calculation and in which the language of individual rights that are capable of withstanding social convenience is anathema.’ According to Binchy, the Directive does not adopt any particular philosophy in this context nor provide specific guidance on what outcome one is to expect. While appreciating the problematic situation that the Directive finds itself in, Binchy nonetheless faults the language of the Directive for not making overt reference to the concepts of human dignity, autonomy and bodily integrity. He would have liked the document to have acknowledged the complexity of the problem and the difference ‘between balancing benefits against detriment in respect of one particular person and balancing social benefits against one particular person’s detriment’, adding that these two questions raise quite different issues. ‘Justification of Medical Exposures and Medico-legal Exposures,’ http://ec.europa.eu/energy/nuclear/radioprotection/publication/doc/102_en.pdf.
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Acting ethically challenges us to provide a more consistent and more systematic answer to dilemmas. In some cases the answer to the question ‘what ought I to do?’ must be quick and even instinctive. But in the ethical context, one’s answer should be much more thoughtful. This does not mean that every time we find ourselves with an ethical challenge, we cannot and should not act until we have undergone a prolonged and thorough process of thinking about the matter. Many cases, particularly medical ones, do not allow us that luxury for every problem. But the study of ethics in one’s training and education in the professions can be of paramount importance as it can provide us with a ‘theoretical framework’ to enable an ethical solution to a problem. The basis for one’s judgment, even those made in a hurry, may then be more firmly grounded. The purpose of an education in ethics is to expose underlying theoretical assumptions and subject them to a critical evaluation, and to provide an early warning system to potential problems in urgent cases. Ethics education helps to nurture one’s moral sense by scrutinizing more critically not merely the question we are asking but also, and more importantly, the underlying assumptions behind those questions. The role of ethics is important in re-thinking the issue of ethical justification in radiology just as it is in every facet of life.

REFERENCES