The anthropological approach challenges the conventional approach to bioethical dilemmas: a Kenyan Maasai perspective.

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Abstract:
Background: The cultural background, religion and societal norms have a huge influence on the decision making process for physicians, patients and their families, when faced with medical ethical dilemmas. While the medical professionals, through their training, can rely on the principles of autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence to guide them, the patients can only draw from their personal and cultural experiences.

Objective: To explore some of the challenges that face physicians when presented with ethical dilemmas.

Methods: A review of the literature on the principles of medical ethics and the cultural practices of the Maasai tribe, as well as, interview, interaction and observation of the patients and family during patient management.

Results: In the Maasai community in Kenya, where family is the center of all attention and decision-making, the listed ethical principles and rules have a very different understanding of the self-determination, and autonomy becomes collective rather than individualistic. Medical practitioners when faced with ethical medical dilemmas are neither comfortable in adopting the conventional bioethical guidelines, nor in offering a health care purely based on cultural and historical practice.

Conclusion: In our set up, developing culturally relevant principles of bioethics appears to be the most effective solution in addressing medical ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: Bioethical dilemmas, Kenyan Maasai perspective.

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Introduction
The literature on biomedical ethics has identified several moral principles, such as respecting the wishes of the competent person who are, do no harm to others including a prohibition against killing and cruel treatment, benefit others, produce a net balance of benefit over harm, keep promises and contracts, disclose information, respect privacy and protect confidential information etc. Some of these obligations are regarded as primary and fundamental, whereas others are secondary and derivative. Amongst these Beauchamp & Childress have jointly recognized autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice as primary principles, which have generally been accepted as the four basic principles of medical ethics.1,2

The process of reasoning and decision making when it comes to bioethical problems is based on the premise that individuals are rational human beings who should engage in a process of moral reasoning, based on normative rules or principles, to arrive at decisions in situations of conflict or ambiguity.3 In this regard, the decision making process is very contextual, influenced by the immediate environment and culture. There is a complex interaction of sociocultural, institutional, political and personal factors that contribute towards the precipitation/formation of the bioethical dilemma, and these must be taken into consideration if one is to fully understand the rationale of the moral decision making process by those faced with the bioethical dilemma.

The shortcomings of the principles of bioethics
The principles of bioethics put forward by Beauchamp & Childress are neither foreign to Kenyans nor to the practice of bioethics in Kenya, yet in the application of these principles to actual situations, different interpretations surface, especially as concerns the principles of autonomy, justice, and decision making. One realizes that in the application of these principles in our set up, a lot of complex factors and subtle ties of real life situations that are key to the evolution of the moral conflict are not taken into consideration. Such factors include gender, life stories, cultural identities, psychological status etc. The principle-based ethics therefore ignore the impact that these factors may have in the decision making process and thus comes across as being abstract and removed from moral and psychological realities of the problem.4

The anthropological approach to bioethics
We believe that the anthropological approach to bioethics may be best placed to address the shortcomings of the principle-based approach to solving bioethical dilemmas. The anthropological approach focuses on solving bioethical issues by use of local societal norms and cultural perspectives. Muller describes the anthropological approach to bioethical problems as having four overlapping dimensions. These pertain to a) the contextual nature of bioethical dilemmas, where the anthropological position sees the definition of a medical dilemma and the ways in which it is handled as inextricably bound to broad cultural conditions that influence health and illness behavior generally; b) the cultural embeddedness of moral systems, where different cultural systems have different standards for behavior and different expectations for relationships that are played out in health care arenas; c) the multicultural character of many bioethical dilemmas, where the anthropological approach places emphasis on the dilemmas resulting from cultural pluralism; and d) the challenge of examining the field of bioethics as a cultural phenomenon. This dimension explores the premise that bioethics is a social, cultural, and intellectual phenomenon that should be examined in its own right.5

Methodology
The methodology for this paper was carried out in two ways;
First by observation of the Maasai patients and their relatives while working at the hospital over several years.
This was done mainly in the ICU because in the critical care setting a lot of decision making comes into play regarding the patients’ treatment and end of life issues.
Observation on how decisions were made on issues of life when it came to Maasai patients and their families prompted us to search electronically for any literature on the Maasai culture that would influence how they were making decisions on bioethical issues.
Electronic searches were conducted in two main stages.
Stage one: electronic database searching in PubMed through www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/. The Key words used were Maasai, bioethics, anthropology. By using this site and its link to “related articles”, several studies were produced. The titles and abstracts of the studies were examined and reviewed and the studies found to be applicable were used.
Stage two: Electronic searches were conducted for full text documents in HINARI-WHO-Kenya, as well as manual search through text books and journals. The studies that were used in this review included prospective, retrospective, case series and case reports.

Discussion
Using case studies from the Maasai culture in Kenya, we explore some of the challenges that we as Kenyan healthcare providers face in the application of the principle-based approach to bioethical dilemmas and how the anthropological approach may contribute to developing culturally relevant principles of bioethics that will help us resolve these bioethical dilemmas.

The anthropological approach to medical bioethics and its relevance to the maasai culture
In the Maasai culture, as in many non-western cultures, the family, or the doctor and the family, often make decisions about a patient’s health care. This model, in which religious, cultural, spiritual beliefs and the extended family play a primary role in matters dealing with marriage, survival, and all aspect of life including terminal illness, is shared by many other Kenyan and Eastern cultures6.7
However this contrasts significantly with the situation prevalent in many Western communities where a patient’s individual autonomy, is generally accepted as the cornerstone of medical ethics particularly in decisions involving medical care and end of life.8

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The primacy of autonomy and individualism is especially problematic as it does not acknowledge the incommensurability between particular Western and incommensurable cultural traditions. According to Lieban, ethical approaches to medical ethics, which would encompass a collective approach to medical ethics, offer a health care purely based on cultural and historical practice.

The Maasai believe in God, (Engai). Although they pray as a community during major ceremonies, their daily lives also incorporate many phrases expressing their awareness of God's presence like “Engai alese naiyinio”, only God knows. The two most important things that the Maasai constantly pray for are the children and cattle. The most respected and feared of Maasai elders is the “Laibon”. He combines the functions of the spiritual leader, “aid, healer, expert on rituals, and provider of medicine. Laibon is believed to have descended from God, and he is the center of the family. He will then confer with the other members to see what decision is to be taken. After the decision is made, it is the duty of the family and physician to ease the patient’s pain and anxiety. Furthermore, when considering a different treatment option, the family members are consulted first. The patient is the eldest man, the family members, will then confer with another subcommittee, which normally consists of a group of elderly members.

In the codes of medical ethics the guidelines regarding disclosure of diagnosis are not unequivocal and may be interpreted in many ways. Doctors should practice their art with purity and holiness, which may imply vacancy, in accordance with the restatement of the Hippocratic oath, declaration of Geneva (1947), stating simply that the health of the patient should be the physician’s first consideration and in declaration of Lisbon (1981), the patient has the right to accept or refuse treatment after receiving adequate information. All may suggest that telling the truth about diagnosis is a mere prerequisite to the choice of treatment and the same is reinforced in the general and the hospital ethical guidelines.

In a society where family is the center of all attention and decision-making, the listed ethical principles and rules have a very different understanding of the self-determination, and the autonomy becomes collective rather than individualistic. In Maasai culture the center of each person’s life is not himself but the family and the tribe. Thus, autonomy can only be spoken of as a collective right rather than an individual privilege.

In the deontological approach, the word “competent” may cause reservations. In our situation, the dilemma that the patient who is competent in reality, considered as “incompetent” or a person of “diminished autonomy”. Although one may argue that there is probably no point in telling the truth to those whose cancer or HIV/AIDS disease is so advanced, as they may not be able to cope with it. The survey by Carrese and Rhodes reported a strong Navajo cultural belief that presenting such information to patients is detrimental to their health and welfare “negative words could hurt the patients.” However, in all other cases, the right of those who have presented as patients, to know what is thought to be wrong with them, should be respected. It remains controversial as to when, if ever, a person loses that right and whether it is ethical for a family or community to consider a competent person as incompetent, and not permit them to know or to understand their diagnosis.
In many situations we are unable to give clear guidance on how our action is professionally or theoretically justifiable. A 22-year-old HIV positive patient was diagnosed as having Pulmonary TB and Lymphoma. Later he developed respiratory, renal and hepatic failure. After 2 weeks in ICU, the medical team discussed the issue with the family for the possibility of removing life support system. The family was unhappy with the news, went back to the village and got their medicine man (laibon) who came to see the patient and advised the family “not to give up and that he is expecting an answer from God at any time”. After one week the patient died. We do understand and believe that requests based on deeply held religious and spiritual beliefs, or cultural ties should most often be honored. However, the decision to keep a patient on life support, and not allowing the patient to die with some sense of peace, dignity, that purport to be based upon culture or spirituality, should be subjected to dialogue and evaluation.

The Maasai culture defines the familial and filial responsibilities, obligations of physicians, and decisions that involve end of life situations, and how death itself is to be viewed. To tell four grown up sons that their elderly father had metastatic cancer, and that radiation therapy will ease his pain and prolong his survival, the first thing they said was: “we do not want him to know that he has cancer”, “How long he lives is in the hands of God”, and “The best way to do is to take him home”. In these words lies the essence of decision making when illness strikes the elder member of the family. In this situation, the family rather than the patient or the doctor, takes the central stage in this process.

Often the family will not allow the disclosure of terminal illness to the patient and they will always show concern about allowing the patient to die in peace and without any intervention, regardless of what the intervention will offer the patient. This is perceived as a form of caring, particularly towards the elderly, born of the concern to protect the patient from additional distress.

We believe that replacing the system of supportive-in-terdependent relationship within families with another that focuses on disconnecting individual’s rights exclusively of family interests is neither feasible nor desirable. However, in a few occasions, a shift to some kind of middle ground is possible although the room for flexibility is narrow and the dynamic balance, which can preserve the important culture values, is difficult to find. The major risk to the patient in such a set up lies in the potential abuse of this unchallenged power that physicians command in a country where the population is largely illiterate and economically disadvantaged.

Conclusion

In cultural societies like Kenya, our bioethics cannot ignore the fact that this community is deeply entrenched in religious and cultural norms that emphasize the priority of the family with well-defined roles, and physicians have been expected traditionally to draw their professional morality from duty and obligations. In Kenya today skilled physicians and surgeons are no longer difficult to find, state of the art technology is already in the private and public sectors, thus the physicians are moving very fast towards an approach, which is distant and akin to the contractual model prevalent in the west, with its over emphasis on individualism, and with minimum cultural concern. Such a change needs a literate population and society with well established, effective checks and balances through institutional, professional and governmental bodies. Unfortunately, in our situation, these do not function and sometimes are absent. Thus such change can be extremely hazardous to the patient, who may end up paying such an unacceptably high price in the name of medical progress. Therefore developing culturally relevant principles of bioethics has remained the only solution and the anthropological approach to bioethics may help us achieve this.

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