

ASPECT OF ETHICS FOR RADIOLOGY RESIDENTS: IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Nadir Khan

Department of Radiology, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Pakistan

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Introduction

Ethical aspect of medicine has become fundamental in dealing with patients. Ethical conduct also plays an important role at the level of residency. For radiology residents it is as important as it is for more clinical services such as surgical or medical residents, because in the new era of radiology patient interaction has increased substantially. Ethics in imaging is not only concerned when there is direct patient contact. In radiology, behind every image is a patient and interpreting any image or performing a procedure implies that a resident is a part of the team managing the patient.

The knowledge of ethics in our community is not well developed. It probably relates to general unawareness and not understanding the importance of ethics in dealing with patients. This partly is due to absence of teaching in schooling and guidance from peers. I am not aware of any proper form of ethical teaching or standards established at postgraduate level. However internationally ethics has received significant interest and has generated many changes in the conduct with patient, such as informed consent. The American Board of Medical Specialties has adopted six competencies to ensure proper ethical conduct with patients, which include medical knowledge, patient care, interpersonal and communication skills, professionalism, practice-based learning and improvement, and systems-based practice.¹ The objectives of this article is to discuss different aspects of interpersonal and communication skills.

Correspondence : Dr. Nadir Khan
Department of Radiology,
Aga Khan University Hospital,
Stadium Road, P.O. Box 3500, Karachi 74800
Pakistan. Tel. No: 34930051 - Ext. 2020
Email: nadir.jilani@aku.edu

What is ethics and how does it involve us?

Before we continue in the main focus of discussion, first as residents do we understand what is ethics? Of the several definitions available I feel this is simple and covers all the rules.

“the principles of right and wrong that are accepted by an individual or a social group”.

Do we understand in how many ways ethics is involved in interaction with patient and radiology residents? You would be surprised the various aspect of physician-patient interaction that comes in the category of ethics. Some but not all include communicating effectively with patients and family, obtaining proper informed consent and explaining the procedure, the use of medication such as intravenous use of contrast media, sedation in pediatric and general anesthesia, the ten-day rule and pregnancy related issues with radiation, interventional radiology invasive procedures including image-guided biopsies and aspirations, the understanding of impact of cost of procedure to patient and subsequently selecting the best imaging modality with least amount of radiation, the overuse of diagnostic procedures and radiation doses, and Teleradiology and filmless imaging.

In this article we are mainly going to focus on the important aspects of effective communication skills that should be incorporated into radiology residents. And further will give a few pointers that can help develop these skills.

Interpersonal and communication skills:

10 or 20 years back radiology residents did not have a lot of interaction with patients however a lot has changed. Since the inclusion of interventional radiology and other invasive procedures in CT, MRI and ultrasound proper communication with patients has become vital. Second the role of radiology in the management of patients has become significant with the advent of therapeutic procedures which need patient counseling, history taking, consent and follow up examinations. Finally the overall importance of radiology as a whole in medical specialties has become more dynamic and more involved with the availability of many imaging modalities such as MDCT, MRI and PET scanners.

Radiology resident's ethical conduct is not only important as they are usually the first to interact with patients but also as during residency they can use the time to develop the skills to become effective communicators. Traits of effective communicator as outlined by Gunderman in American Journal of Roentgenology are *Sensitivity, Courtesy, Compassion, Appropriateness, Honesty and Openness*.² These skills can not be developed quickly however with effective use and effort these can be incorporated in our lives as in-born traits. These skills will not only help us in interacting with patients but also will help communicate more effectively with other residents and physicians from all specialties. These skills will create a level of confidence between you and your patient and may even help avoid medico-legal issues.

How to develop interpersonal and communication skills during your training:

The first step is gaining the knowledge and understanding that this is an important aspect of your profession and will help you in dealing with patients. Second the desire to improve oneself and the effort to change and incorporate ethical conduct in ourselves as an inborn trait will make us a better radiologist. The following few points may help you achieve just that.

- Introduction: Clearly and professionally introduce oneself to patient and family and have a badge on for proof.
- Completely explain the imaging study to be performed to the patient and attendant.

- Provide opportunity to ask questions, be able to complete answer the question and make sure that all confusion has been clarified.
- While obtaining the informed consent review risks, benefits and alternatives procedures.
- Communicate and interact responsibly with other physicians, nurses and staff.
- Be formal but not stern with patients and family. Smile but not laugh. Communicate with Mr and Mrs and not the first names.
- Maintain a healthy relationship by washing hands. Introduce yourself and shake hands if appropriate with everyone.
- Make eye contact and if needed a touch on the hand or shoulder to give support which can be 100 words to a worried patient.
- If you are wrong accept your mistake.

References

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