

Al-Zahrawi University



2nd Semester

Medical Ethics

3rd Grade

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Lecture 1

(Introduction to Medical Ethics and General Terms)

Introduction

Medical ethics is a fundamental science in healthcare education that guides professional behavior and decision-making.

For pharmacists, ethical practice is not optional; it is an essential component of patient care, public trust, and professional responsibility.

Why pharmacy students should study Medical Ethics?

As future healthcare providers, pharmacy students must understand ethical principles to deal with real-life situations related to medications, patients, physicians, pharmaceutical companies, and society.

Medical ethics is a cornerstone of professional pharmacy practice. Understanding ethical principles and general terms enables pharmacists to provide safe, respectful, and responsible patient care.

This foundational knowledge prepares students to address complex ethical issues encountered in advanced pharmacy practice.

What is Ethics in general?

The word ethics is **derived** from the **Greek word ethos**, meaning character, custom, or habit. Ethics refers to the moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity.

Ethics can be defined as:

“A system of moral principles that differentiates between (right and wrong), (good and bad) behavior.”

Ethics **helps individuals and professionals** decide what they **cannot do**, not just what **they can do**.

Medical ethics is a branch of applied ethics that deals with moral values and judgments in healthcare and medical practice.

Medical ethics can be **differentiated** from other applied ethics as:

“The study of moral principles, values, and standards that guide decision-making in medical and healthcare professions.”

Examples of medical and healthcare professions:

- Physicians
- Pharmacists
- Nurses
- Dentists

Examples of Medical Ethics Principles in Pharmacy practice:

- Handle medications ethically so they can save and improve patients' lives
- Protect sensitive patient information
- Interact ethically with physicians and pharmaceutical companies

Ethical pharmacy practice ensures:

- Patient safety
- Professional success
- Public trust
- Legal protection

Unethical behavior in pharmacy practice may lead to:

- Patient harm
- Professional failure
- Loss of people trust
- Legal consequences

Ethics, Morality, Law, and Religion

Although related, these concepts (Ethics, Morality, Law, and Religion) **are not identical**.

1 – Ethics vs. Morality

Morality refers to personal or cultural beliefs about right and wrong.

Ethics refers to systematic rules and principles that guide professional conduct.

Morality is **subjective**, while ethics aims to be **objective** and **professional**.

Example:

A pharmacist personally believes (**morality**) that **family members** should know everything about each other.

However, a patient asks the pharmacist **not to share their medical information** with their family.

Moral belief: “Families should share information.”

Ethical rule: Patient privacy must be protected.

The pharmacist **must keep the information private**, even if it conflicts with personal beliefs.

2 – Ethics vs. Law

Law consists of rules enforced by the government.

Ethics goes beyond legal requirements.

An action may be legal but unethical, or ethical but illegal.

Example:

Dispensing a medication without counseling may be **legal** in some settings but **ethically unacceptable**.

3 – Ethics and Religion

Religion is based on **individual beliefs**, but medical ethics is based on **universal principles** applicable to people of **different beliefs**.

Example:

A healthcare professional believes, due to religion, that **ending life** is morally wrong.

A terminally ill patient, after full explanation, requests **to stop aggressive treatment**.

Religion: Life should not be intentionally ended.

Medical ethics: Respect patient autonomy (patient choice) and avoid unnecessary suffering

Ethics guides the decision, focusing on **patient choice**, not the provider's religion.

General Ethical Terms in Medical Ethics

1 – Autonomy

Autonomy means respecting the **patient's right to make decisions** about their own healthcare.

Pharmacists must:

Respect patient choices

Avoid coercion

2 – Beneficence

Beneficence refers to **acting in the best interest** of the patient.

Example: Recommending the most effective and safe medication.

3 – Non-Maleficence

Non-maleficence means “**do no harm**”

Examples:

Medication errors

Drug interactions

Unsafe practices

4 – Justice

Justice refers to fairness and equality in healthcare.

Examples:

Fair distribution of limited medicines

Equal treatment of patients

Ethical Dilemmas

An ethical dilemma occurs when there is a **conflict between two or more ethical principles**. Ethical dilemmas require **professional judgment**.

Example:

Respecting patient **autonomy vs. preventing harm**.

A competent adult patient **refuses a life-saving medication** because of personal beliefs (**medicines containing alcohol**).

Ethical principle 1: Respect for patient autonomy (the patient has the right to decide).

Ethical principle 2: Non-maleficence / Beneficence (the duty to prevent harm and save life).

Ethical dilemma:

Should the healthcare professional respect the patient's decision, or override it to prevent serious harm?

Ethical resolution (medical ethics approach):

- If alternative is available:

Prescribe or recommend an alcohol-free alternative if available.

- If alternative is not available:

The healthcare professional should:

- Explain the benefits:

Inform the patient about the benefit of alcohol content and its pharmaceutical purpose.

- Explain the risks:

Tell the patient what happen if he/she does not administer the medication.

- Finally, respect patient decision.