

Bioethics School of Wellcome Trust Conference, Mumbai

Abstract of Talk, December 2, 2009

**“Negotiating and Navigating the Informed Consent: Ruminations of a Surgeon from  
Pakistan”**

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Obtaining an ethical informed consent (IC) is central to demonstrating respect for the patient. Mainstream American bioethics, grounded in a philosophical, analytic framework, views the IC through a prism in which the patient is the autonomous locus for all her decisions, a theoretical individual existing free of dependencies and interdependencies that are central to most human lives. Moreover, it defines the medical encounter as a rational contract between two “equal” agents and not as a fiduciary relationship between the physician and patient.

In the “globalization” of contemporary bioethics it is this contractual model of IC, in which autonomy of patients is emphasized and obligations of physicians minimized, which is becoming the dominant paradigm for ethical discourse and ethics education. And yet, in countries such as ours, traditional values, religious beliefs, socioeconomically enmeshed and profoundly interdependent families and above all, strong power differentials remain realities of life for both women and men.

I will use examples from my clinical experience in Pakistan to highlight how under these circumstances an IC that truly respects the patient will often involve negotiations and navigations that involve the family of which she is an intricate part. I believe that we run the risk of turning bioethics into a popular but ineffective academic exercise unless we begin to engage actively in a constructive critique of the model we appear to be transplanting into our soils while also turning a critical eye on our own cultural and social constructs of what is ethical and what is not.

October 31, 2009