Do healthcare institutions act as moral agents? Can they acquire moral characteristics through capacity building? Do individual clinicians get influenced by value-based organizational activities? These are difficult to answer philosophical questions. But this phenomenon has been put to test in one of the healthcare institutions in Karachi.

Patel Hospital is a 250 bedded, not for profit, community-based hospital which initially focused on the provision of general surgical and gynecology and obstetrics services. But gradually, it evolved into a tertiary care hospital providing multi-disciplinary care at affordable cost along with postgraduate teaching and training.

Along with its growth on clinical and academic fronts, Patel hospital has shown significant growth on the ethical front as well. It all started in 2004, when the clinical head of the institution, Dr. Tufail Bawa, asked me, the new inductee of the institution, to develop a hospital ethics committee (HEC). Having been introduced to the ethical discourse in patient care through ethics consultation and ethics grand rounds during my surgical training at the Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH), I had some clue as to the solution but was completely ignorant of the process.

One of the lead faculty at the Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture, Dr. Aamir Jafarey, came to my rescue and helped the institution in developing procedures and protocols for a HEC. That was the beginning of a never-ending relationship between CBEC and Patel hospital, initiating the latter’s development as a moral agent.

Today we have:
- A Hospital Ethics Committee functioning since 2004 as a clinical ethics committee as well as an institutional review board for research
- A medical error reporting and analysis committee as an offshoot of ethical discourse within the HEC on organizational ethics and medical error
- Ethical review of institutional policies as and when brought to the notice of the HEC by the stakeholders
- Research ethics workshops for capacity building in collaboration with CBEC
- Three CBEC alumni associated with the institution, namely, Ms. Shabana Tabassum, Dr. Abeer Saleem and myself, are contributing to the ethical discourse via coordination and chairing of various institutional bodies dealing with ethics and a postgraduate ethics teaching program. Dr. Saleem, in fact, continues to run the postgraduate ethics teaching program even after moving to another institution.

Ethics has become an important element in decision-making at all levels within Patel Hospital, making it a moral agent for change.

* Nida Wahid Bashir, PGD Alumnus (2010), Head of General Surgery, Patel Hospital, Karachi