

Differential Perception of Human Life Value and Bioethics

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to reflect on the potential of perception of different value of human life in influencing ethics violations particularly in health and medical research. It is opined here that sometimes the members of research community and business entities perceive their own life to be more precious than other lives. The factor discussed for bioethical violations is the perception of different importance of human lives of people of different races, cultures, regions, countries or ethnic origins in the minds of fellow humans. The experiments carried out on Jews in Nazi camps, African-American people in Tuskegee experiment, and Guatemalans in Guatemala Syphilis experiment point to this perception. The learned medical scientists know what morally sound medical research is; however sometimes they are influenced by their perception of value of other human's life. The researchers for clinical or experimental trials are drawn to inhabitants of underdeveloped or developing nations as they perceive that if in case there is any harm to the clinical subjects' health, there won't be any big payouts; as the worth of those subjects is less than clinical subjects in a developed country. In some of the unethical human experimentations, the effected populations were vulnerable due to their social or economic conditions, being a war personnel, mentally depressed or being inmates in prisons. This vulnerability of the subjects makes the researcher throw away the concept of 'equality in the value of human life'. As long as this mentality of different values of human life persists, it will feed into ethical violations in spite of regulations or laws.

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Undertaking research to find the cures for diseases has been going on since time immemorial. Sometimes, the researchers resort to unethical practices in the zeal to find the cures. This has been brought up by unearthing the research carried out by various entities and research personnel during the last number of years. A summary of some of the known bioethics violations from 1845 to 2007 has been compiled by Adams (Adams, 2011).

Recently, an atrocity against medical science perpetrated by United States Public Health Service physician John Charles Cutler, in Guatemala over 60 years ago has come to light and US Presidential Commission concluded that ethical standards of the time were disregarded but was silent on the reason that why they were disregarded (PBC, 2011). This bioethics violation was uncovered by Professor Susan Mokotoff Reverby of Wellesley College. Reverby found the documents in 2005 while researching the Tuskegee syphilis study, in Cutler's archived papers (Reverby, 2011). U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius issued a formal apology (Clinton and Sebelius, 2010) to the Guatemalan government for the experiments in which Guatemalan prisoners were intentionally infected with syphilis and then treated with antibiotics.

The objective of this paper is to ponder upon the factor- 'the intrinsic value of human life' and how it might have led to the ethic violations in health research.

Is life of a human being precious? What is the intrinsic value of humans? It is opined here that sometimes the political, and business setup and the research community only thinks 'their own life' to be precious enough and not of others. Here 'their own life' sometimes includes being in same race, same ethnicity, same community, same region, same religion, same country or similar economic status country. All 'other lives' are perceived to have minimal value. The value with which you weigh the other individual modifies your behavior and actions towards them. The experiments carried out on Jews in Nazi camps, on African-American people in Tuskegee experiment, and on Guatemalans in Guatemala Syphilis experiment point to this perception. Not only is this true in clinical medicine research but also in the international business and political setup. A life lost in Bhopal accident is considered to be less precious than the livelihood loss due to BP oil spill. The value of life or the earnings value of those in the third world countries (India's in case of Bhopal accident) or other ethnicities (Jews in case of Nazi Experiments) were thought to be irrelevant. On 18th October, 2011 first stage of

swapping of 1,027 Palestine prisoners took place for return of one Israeli citizen pointing to the different perceptions of human lives of two communities.

The economic principles and economic perceptions have also fueled the exploitation of the vulnerable in disease research. A few medical scientists want to achieve fame and economic power, even if it is at the cost of life of humans or harm to humans. The medical research community and the pharmaceutical industry clamor for new disease cures and want to have financial gains. It tries to have the least costs for clinical trials and sometimes resorts to non-ethical studies (editorial; Lancet, 1997). This leads them to countries where the cohort is relatively poor and uneducated, and the scientific labor is cheap. It gives them access to naive people who are suffering from the disease being investigated but are not taking medicines for other diseases. This population which is uneducated, socially backward and having meager resources of livelihood are targeted as the researchers and the pharmaceutical companies know that neither these guinea pigs nor their families have the resources to fight in local courts, leave alone International courts or courts in the countries where the principal investigator (if international) or the main headquarters of the pharmaceutical company is. Thus, the researchers for clinical or experimental trials are drawn to inhabitants of underdeveloped or developing nations to decrease overall cost of development of drug and as they perceive that if in case there is any harm to the clinical subjects' health, there won't be any big payouts; as the worth of those subjects is less than clinical subjects in a developed country.

It is not that the learned and powerful medical scientists do not know what morally sound medical research is. This is also true in presence or absence of bioethical codes and Acts. Several international codes provide guidance on the ethical conduct of clinical research including the Declaration of Helsinki, Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), International Guidelines for Biomedical Research, and the UNAIDS Guidance Document on Ethical Considerations in HIV Vaccine Research. All the research proposals go through IRB or equivalent committees. Even if there are violations these codes are recommendations, not legal imperatives nor any documentation is provided to the subjects if they have any legal course in case something happens.

The main factor for bioethical violations is the perception of different importance of human lives of people of different races, cultures, regions, countries or ethnic origins in the minds of fellow humans. Dr. John C. Cutler of United States Public Health Service, the main Principal-Investigator for Guatemala experiment knew that the study was not morally sound (Reverby, 2011); but nevertheless conducted Guatemala Syphilis experiment not in North East America but in Guatemala. The Guatemala experiments surpassed Nazi experiments in the sense that these were carried out on citizens of another country after taking permission from Guatemala' government in exchange for money and aid. In Nazi experiments, Jews were their own citizens. In lieu of aid from the US government, the Guatemalan's authorities at that time turned a blind eye to the details and protocols of the trials thereby ignoring the value of the life of the prisoners.

The Guatemala Syphilis medical experiments took place in 1948, about the time that U.S. officials were prosecuting Nazi officials for subjecting human beings to gruesome medical experimentation (Hornberger, 2010). The US government which was actively pursuing cases against Nazis for conducting medical experiments on an ethnic population thought that it is fine if they carry out similar experiments in Guatemala as long as the world does not know about them and efforts are made to keep these shrouded in the veil of secrecy. It was basically a different set of rules for you; a different one for me; a different life value for Nazi's subjects and a different life value for Guatemalan experiment subjects.

Another fundamental reason for most of these unethical human experimentations as it comes out is that the effected populations are vulnerable. They might be vulnerable due to their social or economic conditions, unwilling or willing partners to fight a stronger enemy, war personnel, and mental and other inmates in prisons. This vulnerability makes the researcher throw away the concept of 'equality in the value of human life'.

So let us go back to the basic question of perception of value of life and start to evaluate answers to some questions. Is the 'value of life' of a Caucasian of one country different from the value of life of a Caucasian from another country? Is the value of life of a Caucasian different than the value of life of an African-American (Tuskegee experiment); or value of life of a citizen of developed country equal to value of life of a citizen of an underdeveloped country? Was the value of life of a Jew less than that of a German in 1940's or is the value of life of a Jew

more than the value of a life of a Palestinian in 21st century? Is the value of life of a person of one religion equal to value of life of a person having other religion? Is the value of life of a rich CEO of a multinational company equal to the value of a life of a spiritual person in a third world country? Is the value of life of a medical researcher more than the value of life of an experimental human subject in an underdeveloped nation? As long as the answers to these and similar questions provide an unequal life value in the minds of the people even though outwardly they may exclaim- all humans are equal; it will feed into ethical violations in spite of regulations or laws.

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