

Ethical Sensitivity Vignettes

Students received the following scenarios in varying order and were given a half-page or so to list the ethical issues pertaining to each vignette.

1. A 58-year-old male has suffered an extremely large hemorrhage in the left side of his brain and requires life support and surgical intervention to survive. He has previously discussed with you and his family his wish never to be placed on life support. However, his wife wishes to have “everything” done for her husband.
2. You visit an 82-year-old female on a house call. She has been previously healthy and independent. She has been deteriorating for five weeks, she has lost weight, is mildly delirious, and has taken to her bed. You think she needs to come into hospital for further investigations of this. She adamantly refuses.
3. A patient of yours, a 24-year-old married man without any symptoms, with three children, has some blood tests as part of an insurance examination. The results reveal that he is HIV-positive (positive as a carrier of the AIDS virus).
4. Mr. Stephens is a hospitalized 45-year-old widower. Tests have revealed that he has an inoperable malignant lung tumor. He is likely to die within the next six months. He has a past history of depression and is currently on anti-depressant medication. Mr Stephen’s adult children have confided to you that he can not handle “bad news” and have requested that under no circumstances should he be informed of his diagnosis. The nurses believe not only that he is capable of understanding the implications of his test results but also that he should be fully informed.

Note: From “Hebert PC, Meslin EM, Dunn EV. Measuring the ethical sensitivity of medical students: a study at the University of Toronto. *J Med Ethics* 1992;18:142-7.” Reprinted with permission from the British Medical Journal (BMJ) Publishing Group.