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Editorial

Medical research; ethical propriety and conformity

The requirement to adhere to ethical norms is an essential universal prerequisite of medical research today. Ethical violations are of varying hues of severity. Gone are the days of cruel medical experiments done on live subjects by the Nazis and the inhuman Tuskegee study done in the United States during modern times. In the “Tuskegee study of untreated syphilis in the Negro male” the natural history of syphilis was studied without treating infected patients. The study commenced in 1932, and infected subjects were not given medication even when penicillin became the drug choice for syphilis in 1947 and they were left untreated until 1972. The patients were told that they were being treated for “bad blood”, violating the fundamental tenet of *informed consent*. It is held that the Tuskegee experiment was ethically unjustified.

Going back farther in time, Edward Jenner, the English physician who is considered as the medical pioneer developed the smallpox vaccine in 1796, in the course of his ‘research,’ had injected an unsuspecting 8 year-old child with pus taken from a cowpox lesion and exposed her to an infected carrier of smallpox. Although Jenner is considered as a medical doyen, can his actions be held ethically acceptable from a current context? This shows that normative ethical standards have varied and progressed over time and space, and that they are in a state of flux.

Although ethical improprieties of such gruesome magnitude are not seen today, we note that there have been attempts at unethical research at different levels globally: paucity of information given to research subjects (violation of the concept of informed consent), poor study design, fabrication, plagiarism etc.

Fabrication and dishonesty have led to resignations of leaders in key professional and academic bodies; retraction of papers and orations. Ethics Review Committees have a wide societal view with a mixed composition of professionals and lay persons and they play a key role in assessing and reviewing study designs. Their role goes beyond the mere approval of studies as they have got to ensure that the research work conforms to and abides by the approved study design. Even if there is no dishonesty, bad research can be considered as being unethical.

It is equally important for the publication process to take the moral high ground and ensure that published papers have strictly followed ethical norms. The review process too should be of the highest moral, academic and professional level of integrity with a zero tolerance to ethical impropriety. The *Galle Medical Journal* too strives to maintain highest ethical standards at all times, with the trust reposed in the *Journal* by its readership and our mandatory moral obligation to the global medical community.

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