

Inaugural Asian Paediatric Ethics Conference 2nd and 3rd October 2023



Plenary 4 speaker

A/Prof Rosalind MCDUGALL
University of Melbourne

Associate Professor Rosalind McDougall is an ethicist at the University of Melbourne, with appointments in the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health and the Melbourne Medical School. She completed her postgraduate education at the University of Oxford and the University of Melbourne.

Rosalind's research and teaching focus on the ethical challenges faced by health professionals. Her background is in philosophy and qualitative research, and she brings these ideas and approaches to interdisciplinary analysis of issues in patient care. She has published widely in clinical ethics and reproductive ethics, and is an award-winning educator. In 2018, she was selected as one of the ABC's Top 5 researchers in the humanities and social sciences. She has been involved in providing clinical ethics support in Melbourne hospitals since 2008, including six years at the Royal Children's Hospital. She is currently clinical ethicist at Austin Health, and has previously led the Clinical Ethics Stream of the Australasian Association for Bioethics and Health Law.

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Presentation title: The zone of parental discretion: An ethical tool for navigating conflicts between doctors and parents

Abstract

In paediatrics, health professionals and parents usually agree about appropriate medical treatment for the child. Sometimes, however, clinicians and parents disagree. Parents might prefer an option that differs from the doctor's recommendation. These disagreements are sometimes not resolved by further discussion and the situation reaches an impasse. An ethical approach to navigating this type of situation will be the focus of this presentation.

The zone of parental discretion is an ethical tool developed at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia. It addresses the question: When should a parent's decision about their young child's medical treatment be overridden? The key idea of the zone of parental discretion is that parents are ethically entitled to make choices for their children that are suboptimal from the clinician's perspective, as long as the choices are not harmful to the child. This approach aims to balance children's wellbeing and parents' rights to make medical decisions for their children.

The tool is intended to guide clinicians and clinical ethicists in a hospital context, who are facing an entrenched conflict about medical decision-making for a young child. The clinical ethics service at the Royal Children's Hospital had seen many such cases since its inception in 2005, leading to the articulation of this tool. Some of these were cases where parents were refusing the medical intervention that was recommended for their child. Other cases involved parents who were seeking a form of treatment or management that doctors had not recommended and often were opposed to. The idea of the zone of parental discretion arose directly out of the experience of providing clinical ethics case consultation and support for clinical staff at the hospital.

Using some case examples, this presentation will explain and explore the zone of parental discretion. Aspects covered will include the development of the tool, detailed questions for applying the tool in practice, different ways of overriding parents' decisions (beyond state intervention), and the concept of harm in the paediatric context. Strengths and limitations of the tool will be addressed.