



Opening Keynote Lecture: Ethical Challenges in Children's healthcare

Abstract

I have identified five ethical challenges that are fundamental for the hospital clinician to consider in delivering optimal healthcare to children. This is not to ignore challenges that children face on a global scale, such as provision of safe drinking water, food security, vaccines and access to basic healthcare. These are obligations, as world citizens, that we all share, but my expertise is in paediatric practice in a large children's hospital so the ethical challenges I have identified reflect my experience. Even in the privileged environment that I practice, there is much work to be done to improve healthcare for children. I have given these five ethical challenges descriptive monikers in an attempt to cut-through the complexities and name the problem to be solved. The first is the 'Toxic Brew' which describes the milieu in which child health is practiced in the current era with technical possibilities and parental demands mixed with poor scientific understanding and reduced respect for medical expertise. The next is 'The Deer in the Headlight' as new and expensive innovations bear down on healthcare systems, threatening to overwhelm them. Then there is 'The Swinging Pendulum' of decision-making as good practice has moved from physician directed to shared, but perhaps gone too far with every thought bubble offered up to parents in the guise of information sharing. The next challenge is finding 'The Lost Child' in paediatric practice in which the adults take up all the space and the person who is our patient becomes subsumed to the interests of others. Finally, I will consider how bioethics should be placed in our hospitals to shine a light on these and other challenges (the 'Lamp under a Bushel').

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Biography

Prof Massie is a clinical ethicist and paediatric respiratory physician at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. John works in the RCH cystic fibrosis clinic and is looks after children with neuro-disability requiring ventilator support. His interests include mechanical ventilation for disabled children, the diagnosis of CF, newborn screening and reproductive genetic carrier screening. He has published regularly on ethical issues relating to paediatric respiratory medicine, CF, and the medical humanities. He is lead editor of the book, "Deciding with Children in Paediatrics: Children's Participation in Medical Decision-Making" (Elsevier, release date November 2024). Prof Massie is the host of the CBC podcast show, Essential Ethics.