

Ethical Issues In Schizophrenia: Considerations for Treatment and Research

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KEY WORDS

schizophrenia, ethics, informed consent, decision-making

ABSTRACT

Clinicians who treat patients with schizophrenia may encounter a variety of ethical issues related to both psychiatric and medical treatment of patients. While informed consent is a crucial aspect of the care of all patients, it may present special challenges for patients with schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness that is frequently accompanied by neuropsychological deficits. These impairments, as well as psychotic symptoms and lack of insight, can affect patients' abilities to make fully informed decisions about their own care. Ensuring that consent for treatment is informed, voluntary, and competent can thus become a more difficult endeavor. The ethical principles underlying treatment of these patients, however, are the same as those guiding treatment of all patients. Informed consent, as an embodiment of these ethical principles, represents the expression of individual rights in both clinical and research contexts. Attention to the process of informed consent as an ongoing dialogue strengthens the clinician-patient relationship, improves adherence, and helps the patient clarify options, values, and preferences. In the research setting, psychiatric researchers are increasingly concerned with maximizing the abilities of individuals with severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia to provide meaningful informed consent for protocols. This review addresses decision-making abilities of people with schizophrenia in both treatment and research contexts. Mental Fitness. 2004;3(3):17-23.

INTRODUCTION

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness accompanied by functional, occupational, and social disturbances that can place heavy burdens on the patient, the family, and caregivers. In treating patients with this disorder, clinicians may encounter a variety of ethical issues. Additionally, the development of new treatments for schizophrenia depends on patients with this disorder volunteering for research studies. Ethical conduct of research on schizophrenia depends upon careful enactment of the ethical principles which guide clinical care, but in a different context.

Concepts of respect for autonomy, beneficence, veracity, and justice are fundamental to caring for mentally ill populations. Informed consent, as a pillar of ethical clinical practice and human research, embodies these ethical principles, representing the expression of individual rights in both clinical and research contexts. In patients with schizophrenia, in particular, attention to the spirit, and not simply the letter, of informed consent serves not only as a legal safeguard, but also strengthens the clinician-patient relationship. Informed consent is thus an ongoing opportunity to provide information as well as engage in a discussion about options, values, and preferences. This review addresses the elements of informed consent broadly as well as what is known about decision-making abilities of people with schizophrenia for treatment and research-related decisions. The paper then focuses on potential barriers to informed consent and describes recent work exploring ways to improve consent procedures to optimize the capacity of people with schizophrenia to provide meaningful informed consent.

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