

Review

IS AUTONOMY A UNIVERSAL VALUE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE? SCOPE OF AUTONOMY IN MEDICAL PRACTICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN WESTERN MEDICAL ETHICS AND ISLAMIC MEDICAL ETHICS

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The practice of contemporary medicine has been tremendously influenced by western ideas and it is assumed by many that autonomy is a universal value of human existence, although it is not shared by all cultures. In the World Health Report 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) considered autonomy a “universal” value of human life against which every health system in the world should be judged. Further in Western bioethics, patient autonomy and self-governance prevails in all sectors of social and personal life, a concept unacceptable to some cultures. Since the beginning of the recorded history of human civilization, religious beliefs and practices have been intertwined with the practice of medicine, which is mostly viewed by scientists as mystical and without scientific proof. Herein lies the dilemma, whether medical professionals should respect the cultural and religious beliefs of their patients, despite their perceived detrimental influence or seek to supplant them with modern rational and empirical scientific research and or evidence-based medicine despite their abject refusal. In this paper we aim to discuss some of the limitations of patient's autonomy by comparing the process of reasoning in western medical ethics and Islamic medical ethics, in order to examine the possibility and desirability of arriving at a single, unitary and universally acceptable notion of medical ethics. We propose a more flexible viewpoint that accommodates different cultural and religious values in interpreting autonomy and applying it in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural, contemporaneous society in order to provide the highest level of care possible.