
VIII Annual Symposium on Biomedicine, Ethics and Society: “Rethinking Informed Consent: The limits of autonomy”

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A systemic perspective on patient autonomy: Reflective practice, leadership and informed consent in medical education

The symposium title suggests that traditional views of autonomy may not adequately capture the complex realities of informed consent. A binocular perspective may be useful. Through the traditional, individualistic lens, personal autonomy is recognized and justly protected. Through a systemic lens, however, autonomy is an illusion. For example, patients are simultaneously vulnerable to and rationally dependent upon external influences (E.g., a shared decision-making model).

A systemic perspective sees both information and consent as dynamic processes that include personal, group and institutional factors. The behavior of individuals, including decision-making, is presumed to reflect the influence of larger systems in which the individual is embedded (E.g., family, clinic, culture). Physicians are trained in a systemic approach to biological processes. They are inadequately prepared to appreciate and analyze the multifaceted issues that are at play in informed consent – including their own role in the process. For example, typical training in “cultural sensitivity” does not include a critical appraisal of the influence exerted by the culture (E.g., agenda) of one’s own institution.

The presentation will describe our educational method (*Reflective Practice & Leadership*) that incorporates a systemic perspective to help practitioners develop skill in guiding patients and families through the complex circumstances of informed consent. Key elements include: seasoned physician facilitators; small group format; systematic, case-based reasoning exercise; and, translation of analysis into action – the leadership dimension of the practitioner’s role. Example applications of the method in context of pediatric clinical trials will be presented along with a review of educational outcome measures.