

PROPOSAL FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ACCOMPANIMENT TO PROMOTE AUTONOMY IN ADOLESCENT PATIENTS

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■ Abstract

Respect for a patient's autonomy has become a fundamental principle of bioethics, but the case of younger patients remains controversial: decisions about their health often do not take into account their maturity. Therefore, a model of accompanying adolescents in their maturation process is proposed that can be shared by all healthcare professionals and also by any professional working with adolescents in any field. Such accompaniment should be community-based, because promoting self-care capabilities requires having a social support network, and will result in autonomous citizens capable of defining their own life project. This community-based accompaniment should have three goals: the forging of the adolescents' identity, their self-empowerment, and taking care of them. To achieve these goals, parents and professionals need both educational and communication skills, as well as taking into account some important ethical principles, in order to avoid both paternalism and its opposite, *adultism*.

Keywords: model, community, accompaniment, autonomy, adolescents, self-care capabilities.

■ INTRODUCTION

Respect for a patient's autonomy has become a fundamental principle of bioethics, but the case of younger patients remains controversial: decisions about their health often do not take into account their maturity. The reason is that professionals have no common bioethical framework within which to work. In the healthcare field, which this paper focuses on, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2015) has developed an excellent ethical framework for the specific topic of minors' participation in clinical research, and Catalonia has some pediatric institutions, such as Sant Joan de Déu Hospital (n.d.), that are really advanced in pediatric healthcare humanization. Humanization is a very wide concept that has implications concerning time, space, professionals' attitudes and, what our point here, patients' empowerment. The point is that, beyond specific topics (i.e.: clinical research) or humanization initiatives within certain institutions (i.e.: Sant Joan de Déu), there is no general bioethical framework for empowering minors in primary and hospital healthcare. Pediatricians have a legal and clinical framework, but they do not have a shared ethical framework with other professionals outside the healthcare field (i.e.: teachers, social workers and educators), that may allow them to help adolescents become autonomous in managing their own lives.

■ OBJECTIVE

The main goal of this paper is to describe a community-based accompaniment model

to promote adolescents' autonomy. To this end, the problem of managing minors' autonomy will be analyzed by considering its three main controversial aspects: obtaining consent, assessing competence and dealing with confidentiality claims. The accompaniment model will be described then. Self-care, which demands having a social support network, will be defined as the starting point for autonomy development. Next, the main elements of the model will be analysed: its requirements, its main concepts (such as adolescents, health and illness), its basic ethical principles, its three main objectives necessary for developing autonomy (identity, empowerment and care) and the roles of its main actors (adolescents, families, professionals, institutions and society as a whole). Important concepts will also be rethought, such as the best interest of the child and others related to the problems generated by the management of adolescents' autonomy, such as competence, assent and confidentiality. Finally, the main steps of the model will be listed.

■ THE PROBLEM OF MANAGING MINORS' AUTONOMY

Autonomy is a very complex concept, particularly when talking about minors. The bioethical principle of respecting people's autonomy has led to changes in legislation and healthcare models, but in the case of minors their application in practice is highly difficult. What is clear is that respecting minors' decisions requires having helped them develop autonomy in the first place. However, nowadays decisions re-