

# Developing and teaching the deontology and consequentialism ethics foundations of healthcare whistleblowing

*Desarrollar y enseñar los fundamentos éticos de la deontología y el consecuencialismo en la denuncia de irregularidades en la sanidad*

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## Abstract

**Background:** The importance of whistleblowing in health systems is examined in this study.

**Methods:** First, a brief definition and history of whistleblowing are said, especially in health systems. Then the lack of a proper place for whistleblowing in the education of medical students is studied. Then, the status and acceptance of whistleblowing in deontological and consequentialist ethical schools are examined.

**Results:** It is pointed out that almost all normative ethical schools agree with disclosure and whistleblowing and consider it an ethical matter. Therefore, whistleblowing training for students and medical staff is important to improve medical services and increase public confidence in the medical system.

**Conclusion:** The educational systems must take appropriate measures to train and integrate this method with other methods.

**Key words:** Developing, deontology, consequentialism ethics, healthcare whistleblowing.

## Resumen

**Antecedentes:** En este estudio se examina la importancia de la denuncia de irregularidades en los sistemas sanitarios.

**Métodos:** En primer lugar, se hace una breve definición e historia de la denuncia de irregularidades, especialmente en los sistemas sanitarios. A continuación, se estudia la falta de un lugar adecuado para la denuncia de irregularidades en la formación de los estudiantes de medicina. A continuación, se examina la situación y la aceptación de la denuncia de irregularidades en las escuelas de ética deontológica y consecuencialista.

**Resultados:** Se señala que casi todas las escuelas éticas normativas están de acuerdo con la divulgación y la denuncia de irregularidades y la consideran una cuestión ética. Por lo tanto, la formación en materia de denuncia de irregularidades para estudiantes y personal médico es importante para mejorar los servicios médicos y aumentar la confianza del público en el sistema médico.

**Conclusión:** Los sistemas educativos deben tomar las medidas adecuadas para formar e integrar este método con otros.

**Palabras clave:** Desarrollo, deontología, ética consecuencialista, denuncia de irregularidades sanitarias.

## Introduction

Medical, pharmaceutical, and health centers are exposed to all kinds of corruption, especially financial corruption, due to the high volume of capital turnover. Apart from financial and possibly life-threatening damage, corruption in health systems can undermine public and patient trust in medical systems. One of the methods to fight and prevent corruption is whistleblowing. According to some studies, medical students are less inclined to whistleblowing, and even as they progress to higher levels, their inclination decreases<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps one of the reasons is the lack of education and reminders of this important issue in medical ethics courses, so in this study, the role of whistleblowing in the normative medical ethical schools is examined to increase the awareness of students and medical staff about the importance of whistleblowing.

For example, one of these economic corruptions in medicine is related to GlaxoSmithKline. This company sells drugs through deceptive information that has not yet received the necessary licenses and bribes physicians that prescribe the company's drugs and hired an institute to write an article praising the company's drugs. Eventually, four of the company's employees exposed the company's corruption by whistleblowing<sup>3</sup>.

Another example, at Pfizer Inc., nine company employees whistled illegal and unconventional manufacturing of a type of osteoarthritis drug, which led to the company being convicted. There are various methods to prevent corruption, fraud, and professional abuse, such as internal auditing, independent auditing, and internal control<sup>4</sup>. However, the most common method, which is often the least expensive method, is disclosure or whistleblowing. Such abnormalities are revealed by whistleblowing staff.

Totally, 83% of these disclosures are internal, and 17% are publicly disclosed, with whistleblowers reporting their information in various ways to a third party, which could be a senior manager, government official, or media.

In defining whistleblower, four components are usually considered as essential components of this phenomenon:

- A. The intention and will of a person to make information public
- B. Transferring information to parties outside an institution and registering and publishing them in public.
- C. The significance of the transmitted information in terms of their potential or actual performance.
- D. The current membership or prediction of the whistleblower in that institution

From the four elements mentioned, it is concluded that accidental information leakage is not a case of disclosure and must have been determined based on a specific plan and program. While the general public views whistleblowers'

activities as largely positive, the assessments of representatives of government agencies are often quite critical. For example, the revelations of Julian Paul Assange and Edward Joseph Snowden created a heated debate in the media about the ethics of such activities<sup>5</sup>.

### Revival of whistleblowing in the twentieth century

Ralph Nader, a four-term US presidential candidate, American activist, author, lecturer, and lawyer, coined the word whistleblowing in 1970 to fight corruption in the United States<sup>6</sup>. He began his work by whistleblowing about Automobile Manufacturing Companies by writing the book "Unsafe at Any Speed." His actions and initiatives in the fight against corruption and protecting people's rights led him to repeatedly place in the list of 100 most influential American men. Although Ralph Nader revived the word, it has its roots in the 19th century when British police whistled to inform people and other colleagues of the existence of a criminal. Of course, some people associate the word whistle with the whistling of a football referee. Regardless of where the word originated and its history, the importance of this process is whistleblowing in preventing crime and corruption and any unpleasant events that are not necessarily crime or corruption<sup>7</sup>.

### The physician who unjustly became a victim in the whistleblowing:

Perhaps the greatest disclosure in medicine at a time when even many of the simplest codes of ethics did not exist was in the case of the Hungarian physician and surgeon Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818-1865)<sup>8</sup>. Today, however, he is revered and glorified. Countries turn to documents to recognize him as belonging to their country, naming their largest universities after him and erecting statues of him in universities and squares and even coins for him.

At that time, disinfection of the hands was not yet accepted by physicians and surgeons. At that time, surgeons went to the surgery room without disinfecting the same hands that autopsied the bodies and operated on pregnant women. He found that if surgeons disinfected their hands after dissecting the corpses of dead patients and before attending the surgery room, the disease would not be transmitted to mothers, and the death rate would be reduced by 1:6 to 1:10. However, although he did not refrain from any action or disclosure, he was unfortunately ignored by the medical community and was labeled a mental illness. It was later, with the work of Pasteur, Koch, and Lister, that we understood his correct words<sup>9</sup>.

### Semmelweis Reflex

The impact of what the Hungarian physician did was immortalized in the history of medicine and disclosure history. Even a phenomenon called the Semmelweis reflex was perpetuated in the history of medical philosophy due to the importance of the subject.

This term is an allusion to the tendency to reject new evidence or knowledge that does not conform to known rules and beliefs of the day. In some cases, innovations in science lead to punishment rather than corresponding rewards because these innovations conflict with fixed paradigms and behavior patterns<sup>10</sup>.

Although it is not known when this term was first used, it can be found in the writings of Robert Anton Wilson. Timothy Francis Leary (October 22, 1920 - May 31, 1996), in his book *The Game of Life*, describes Semmelweis's reaction as follows: "It is a collective behavior seen between primates and precocious humans on an underdeveloped planet in which the discovery of scientific facts is repressed and condemned<sup>11</sup>. Today, the term has also found its way into philosophy and theological studies and is referred to as "Hume's complete skepticism about causality<sup>11</sup>.

Of course, this phenomenon has a long history. When Edward Jenner asked the Royal Society of England to publish his findings on vaccination, the society's president advised him to refrain from commenting on things that are very different from current science and do not jeopardize the reputation<sup>12</sup>.

### Galileo Gambit

In contrast to the Semmelweis reflex is the term Galileo gambit.

A term is a form of association fallacy often used by those who deny a well-established scientific or historical proposition. Scholars define this argument as follows: Galileo was ridiculed and even tried in his time for his scientific observations, but a few years later, his legitimacy became clear to everyone. Proponents argue that since their views and discoveries are not so consistent with the evidence of the time, this would lead to ridicule and rejection by other scientists, who would later be recognized as righteous scholars like Galileo. Of course, this is a false argument because most of those ridiculed or rejected have gone the wrong way<sup>13</sup>.

### Whistleblowing position among medical students and staff:

As mentioned, the attitude towards the issue of whistleblowing does not have a good place among medical students and physicians because students learn everything from their professors.

Contemporary medical ethics has not yet developed a strong theoretical concept of what is known as "whistleblowing" in healthcare. When medical students with the same ethical scenarios were challenged in the first and last weeks of a four-year medical course, the number of people who made the "right" ethical decision remained unchanged at 40%. Even worse, the percentage of students who confirm that they are reporting unethical behavior has decreased from 13%

in the early weeks to less than 5% in the final weeks. The probable cause of such a decline in what might be called "whistleblowing" is the "hidden curriculum" that is passed on to students through the actions, attitudes, and opinions of senior physicians that they encounter in clinical rotations<sup>14</sup>.

### Acceptability of whistleblowing from the perspective of ethical theory

In this study, the acceptability of whistleblowing in the theories of ethical philosophy was examined. It was hoped that in this way, the acceptance of whistleblowing would be introduced more and more in students' ethics courses so that they are familiar with this subject. Many scholars have commented on the philosophical view of virtuosity about whistleblowing. For the lack of non-repetition, we will not deal with the ethical virtuosity school about which there are more or fewer articles.

### Deontological view on whistleblowing

Deontological ethics is one of the theories proposed in normative ethics, and in answer to the question "What is the criterion of ethical do's and don'ts?" it is formed. This theory emphasizes the relationship between duty and the ethicality of action. Those who believe in deontological ethics will be an ethical act that is inherently ethical in nature, not necessarily one that has ethical consequences. According to this view, regardless of its results and consequences, the criterion of correctness and incorrectness depends on the action itself and its characteristics<sup>15</sup>.

According to Kant, every action must be universal. However, an action that does not take into account the circumstances of others is in itself an unethical act, and universality is sometimes itself an unethical act<sup>16</sup>.

Kant refers to the subject as an absolute issue as meaning the Absolute means that we must always behave so that our rule of action can be a general law for all human beings. From Kant's point of view, ethical principles are unchangeable, but rules depend on whether one wants to do an ethical or unethical act, and this life depends on the person himself<sup>17</sup>.

### The consequentialist view on whistleblowing

This approach, firstly, instead of focusing on the intrinsic characteristics of the act, focuses on its consequence. Secondly, it emphasizes actions and behaviors in ethical values and attaches primary importance to actions. Among the theories of consequentialism, the wisest theory is general ethical utilitarianism. This theory seeks ethical value in the emergence of the greatest good for most human beings. There is disagreement among proponents of utilitarianism as to the greatest good we seek<sup>18</sup>.

According to Russian transhumanists Viktor Ugryumo, a key turning point in this path should be discovering the neural relation of pleasure. This physiological parameter

uniquely determines the level of pleasure (or pain) experienced by an organism<sup>19</sup>.

### Consequentialism is based on two principles:

- Whether an action is right or wrong, or whether an action is, in fact, ethical, depends only on the consequence of that action.
- The more action, the better the consequence, the more correct the action.

The utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill or Jeremy Bentham is a well-known example of consequentialism. In contrast, deontological ethics or deontological theories of John Locke and Emmanuel Kant are examples of non-consequentialism<sup>19</sup>.

Support for whistleblowers should be institutionalized in health systems, and whistleblowers should be treated with acceptable incentives. Although ethical work should not be based on material rewards, at least whistleblowers should avoid potential. Put together, Despite high advances occurred in medical sciences<sup>20-27</sup>, some diseases and disorders remain health threatening<sup>28-36</sup>. However, by observing the ethical principles in medical sciences and technologies, appropriate solutions can be suggested to solve them.

## Conclusions

Training students is essential in advancing medical knowledge and expanding and promoting health services. This training should be 360 degrees, and all aspects of human psychology should be used. However, teaching a book is effective; what the student learns secretly and in practice from his professors is very important. If a student has an ethics-oriented professor, he will also pay attention to ethics and law, which will establish in him. By teaching the acceptability of whistleblowing in the various normative ethics schools, a range will be created in which all tastes, each of which may be inclined to a normative ethics school, become more and more aware of its importance. Different aspects of whistleblowing should be explained to students, such as philosophical principles and related laws and their merits, and students should be encouraged to do so from the beginning. The use of new technologies in creating a suitable platform for whistleblowing, especially for communication and messaging, and creating legal and cultural infrastructure for whistleblowing can help spread this phenomenon and reduce corruption, fraud, and injustice. Hidden education and what students learn indirectly from professors and managers are very important.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declare that he have no conflict of interest.

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