

Deontology

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Deontology: A philosophical school of thought that holds that behavior should be duty-based. Indeed, the word deontology basically means the study or science of duty. It emphasizes issues of moral obligations and rights.

So why does this matter in healthcare? Because it can lead to ethical dilemmas. Say a medical provider's recommendation is based on her feeling that she has a moral obligation to treat a patient in a certain way. But what if her patient has a teleological worldview in which her fate has been predetermined by a higher being and feels that aggressive treatment may not be appropriate? An example would be the issue of cancer during pregnancy and whether abortion might be considered in order to save the life of the mother.

Conflict can also arise between medical providers who insist on the importance of deontological/principle-based ethics with those who argue from a utilitarian standpoint (e.g., health economists) when it comes to cost effectiveness. The deontologist would argue for the autonomy of the medical provider to determine a course of treatment based on the immediate good that would be rendered the patient. The utilitarian would take a broader view of the societal and economic implications of such matters.

A deontologist ne'er hesitates
To do what duty obligates.