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Understanding Bioethics

Ethics: “the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group/culture” the study of values Bioethics: “a field of study concerned with the ethics and philosophical implications of certain biological and medical procedures, technologies, and treatments, as organ transplants, genetic engineering, and care of the terminally ill. The study of life's values

Bioethics was coined by a biochemist, Van Rensselaer Potter, in 1970. Bioethics is a Greek word bíos, life, representing the facts of life and life sciences, and éthos, morals, referring to values and duties. Medical ethics is by itself complex and can at least be divided into clinical medical ethics, institutional medical ethics and health care ethics.

PRINCIPLES Individuals have autonomy or the right to make decisions about their own actions freely and without coercion 1. Individuals have dignity–we should respect people for the simple reason that they are fellow human beings 2. RESPECT for people’s rights In researching treatments, potentially harmful side effects must be weighed against the potential benefits; there should be an equal balance 1. BENEFICENCE: Benefits must be proportionate to risks JUSTICE: The even distribution of benefits and risks throughout society. Groups (racial, ethnic, gender, etc) should potentially benefit and/or potentially be exposed to risk at the same rate as other groups. NONMALEFICENCE: Do no harm Example: While it might be interesting to see what happens to your kneecap if we smashed it with a crowbar, we know that would cause harm to you, so couldn’t do that (even though it might be interesting scientifically).