

Criticism on medical ethics based on the movie 'Awakenings' by Penny Marshall.

Awakenings directed by Penny Marshall is a movie based on a dedicated and caring physician at a local hospital in New York City, Dr Malcolm Sayer. His whole life was dedicated towards the welfare of the patients, so he was a man of humanity. He was a person who worked extensively with catatonic patients who survived the 1917 – 1928 epidemic of encephalitis lethargica.

Dr. Sayer discovers certain stimuli will reach beyond the patients' respective catatonic states such as catching a ball, hearing familiar music & experiencing human touch. The other main character of the movie is Leonard Lowe who is also a catatonic patient but he is able to communicate with Dr. Sayer by using a 'ouija' board which is known as the spirit board or talking board.

Leonard was used in a trial run on L – dopa which is a drug used in Parkinson disease by Dr. Sayer, as he believes that this drug may offer a breakthrough for him. Without knowing the effects of the drug Dr. Sayer just begin with the medications. Giving astonishing results, Leonard completely awakened from his catatonic state. With the success Dr. Sayer begins L – dopa medication on all other catatonic patients with the funds given by the donors. All the patients receive the experience of 'awakenings' back to reality.

Dr. Sayer has no idea of the doses of L – Dopa which were used regarding the catatonic patients. He has given the amount of doses he may feel. This is a point where he has gone wrong and acting in an unethical way. Treating patients does not depend on humanity itself; it's better to remember that with whom we are dealing with. Though Dr. Sayer has taken the consent from Leonard's mother, he has no any idea whether L- Dopa may work or not. He begins treatments on patients without thinking about the risks of the drugs. Though he has learnt some fundamental things on L- Dopa by a chemist, as a doctor he has no idea on the results of the drug. This is a situation which shows

the unethical management of the disease by Dr. Sayer. He is focusing on the temporary measure of the success of L-Dopa, but when the period of awakening begins to limit, then Dr. Sayer begins to think more about his decision. Leonard is the first to demonstrate that.

During the period of awakening, Leonard becomes romantically interested in Paula, the daughter of another hospital patient. But when he begins to suffer from full body spasms, he acknowledges what is happening to him. The moment when Leonard gets the departure from the Paula, telling her he cannot see her again anymore is a pathetic situation. Leonard returns back to his catatonic state soon after saying goodbye to the reality. Dr. Sayer feels sorry for his friend Leonard, but nothing to do beyond that.

In the last few minutes of the movie, Sayer tells a group of grant donors to the hospital that although the "awakening" did not last, another kind — one of learning to appreciate and live life — took place. He himself overcomes his painful shyness and asks Nurse Eleanor Costello to go out for coffee. Dr. Sayer has failed in L-Dopa medication for catatonic patients. But revealing that he has not given up his dedication towards his patients, film ends with Sayer standing over Leonard behind an ouija board with his hands on Leonard's hand, which are on the planchette "Let's begin"

Disregarding the fact that Sayer failed in using L-Dopa another aspect can be observed. A catatonic patient after becoming in to his or her pathetic condition, has to spend all his life in that way; a kind of senseless, non responding life until death. So it may be for years and decades. Even Dr. Sayer was unethical in using his preferable doses for the patients, it gave them at least one day of real life that you and me are spending. More than just letting them to be senseless and die so, it is worthy to take them back to the real world at least for a day. In that dimension the doctor is not wrong in a way. Also if he or another doctor did not even try on a solution like that the medicine will not progress in to the state it is now. The people who have thought beyond the boxes are the ones who have gone for the inventions. This is also another try of a man at least to know that high doses of L-Dopa will not cure the disease.

And also in the first scenes some of the nurses are just watching the television in their working hours. This thing happens even now in some of the hospitals. It is so irresponsible to be distracted by the television or anything when they are on duty. May be they must have thought that what difference it makes by the death of a senseless person like this. But the difference will be felt by the closest people. So they should give the same attention to every person they meet cause it is another life that they are dealing with. The last scenes it shows that they all understand their duties and work on according to them after the thing happened with Leonard. But for a nurse to be dutiful, any special thing to be happen in the hospital is not a requirement.

Also when he talks to his colleague Dr. Kaufman first about the new idea about L-Dopa he receives not much concern from him. He does not even pay attention to the fact that the catatonic patients are alive inside. He says "Let the chemist do the damage" which means indirectly do not involve in those things because if it goes wrong it will harm the name of the doctor. Just because a doctor needs to protect his reputation in front of the society, it is not good of him to be away from the problems. A doctor should try to go beyond the normal procedure of prescribing medicine and examining patients. But when someone is expecting support it is not justifiable to reject solely to protect his name. It is an injustice towards the human kind too.

All in all when considering the main character of the film which was Dr. Sayer he should be respected as at least he tried without any help from others; just to make his patients' world beautiful. He was too irresponsible in the manner he used the drugs as sometimes it could have killed the patient too. And his devotion, commitment towards the patients and also the love and kindness he showed them was unique. In emotional aspect he was so close to the patients and wished for their happiness too, theoretically he made a blunt mistake in choosing the doses of a drug which he cannot predict. But in other ways he was following the ethical rules; like asking the consent of Leonard's mother and revealing the true states to her. May be he had a strong belief that L – Dopa will work out and he may have been trying to experiment it somehow.

As human being a doctor cannot be perfect too. But in every way that is possible, he should work according to the laws, follow the social acceptance

and be emotionally strong enough to tolerate the patients and to be devoted for them.

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