

Review of medical ethics based on movie “awakenings” directed by Penny Marshall

Story is built around a physician, Dr. Malcolm Sayer, at Bainbridge mental hospital at Bronx in New York city.

When moving to the plot of the movie, one day a new doctor comes to work in the Bainbridge hospital. He has no experience working with patients; indeed, his last project involved earthworms.

He talks without hope to one of the women, who looks blankly at him, her head and body frozen. But then he turns away, and when he turns back she has changed her position. Based on her, he tries an experiment. Eventually Dr.Sayer understands that these patients are not actually frozen at all, but victims of a stage of Parkinson’s disease. What he discovered in the summer of 1969 was that L-dopa a new drug for the treatment of Parkinson disease.

Other main character of the movie is Leonard Lowe who is also a catatonic patient. He is a bright lovable kid until the disease capture his delicate childhood. But he is able to communicate with Dr.Sayer by using a talking (Ouija) board. Meanwhile Dr.Sayer hear about the new drug L-dopa. Dr.Sayer think that this may be benefit for those catatonic patients.

After taking consent from the Leonard’s mother, Leonard is his first patient to take the experimental drug. Without knowing the effects of the drug Dr.Sayer starts medication with this new drug. With the results of the drug all are wondered. After the intake of drug he is awoken from sleeping sickness in which he suffered from 30 years of his life. With the success, Dr.Sayer begins L-dopa medication on all other catatonic patients. All the patients receive the experience of ‘awakening’ back to reality. Leonard cooperates Dr.Sayer in studying his case.

During the period of awakening, Leonard falls in love with Paula, a daughter of another hospital patient. As the time passed by doctor notices Leonard grows more agitated and number of facial and body tics are starting to appear that he was difficult to control. Soon doctor realizes that results of the drug is only a temporary thing. When Leonard begins to suffer from full body spasms, he acknowledges that 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. Eventually other patients also return back to the sleeping sickness no matter how much their L-dopa dosage is increased.

Finally Dr.Sayer addresses a gathering and mention that the ‘awakening’ do not last long. It reflects a lesson for the public to appreciate and live life with work, play, friendship and family. Film ends with Dr.Sayer standing over Leonard, behind a talking board, which showing “let’s begin” giving a tear to the eye of audience.

The movie itself leaves a landmark in the subject of medical ethics. In each and every aspect of movie we see Dr.Sayer dedicate his whole life towards the welfare of the patients. His practice of medical ethics improves the interaction between him and his patients than other doctors in the ward.

There are four basic principal of medical ethics. They are autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice.

Autonomy is the respect for the patient’s right to self-determination. An informed adult patient can refuse or accept treatments according to their wishes. When we move in to the movie, Leonard is not in a position to either accept or deny his treatment because he is suffering from sleeping

sickness. So Dr.Sayer hope to get the consent from the Leonard's mother. Dr.Sayer tries his maximum in making Leonard's mother aware of all the experimental aspects and possible unknown effects of the drug. Finally he is succeeded with the signing of the consent. Even after successful awakening he continuous the drug under the consent of the patient.

When consider the second principle, beneficence simply explains duty of the healthcare providers is to improve their patient's health, to do good for patients in every situation. The group of patients once abandoned by the society thinking that they are no more important is brought back to the real life by the unyielding dedication and commitment of Dr.Sayer with the assistance of fellow nurses he tries his best to find out a way to get this patients out from their sleeping sickness. Soon he discovers certain stimuli reach beyond the patient's respective sleeping status such as catching a ball, hearing familiar music and experiencing human touch. After attending a lecture on L-dopa and its success in Parkinson disease, he believes that same drug will also work with its own group. His sole effort is to awake patients back to the reality. Even after Leonard is awoken, doctor give more and more priority towards him and helps him to stabilize his mental condition. He is really bound to the beneficence of Leonard.

When Dr.Sayer talks to his colleague Dr.Kaufman about the new idea about L-dopa, he do not even pay attention to the fact that the catatonic patients are alive inside. He says "let the chemist to 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 to be away from the problems.

The third principle is non-maleficence which simply means 'do not harm.' A treatment to a patient is intended for good, unintentionally causes harm. So it helps you to make difficult decision about actions that double effects can be undertaken.

Actually it is really a dangerous fact to be considered in the movie that Dr.Sayer has no idea of the doses of L-dopa which is used regarding the catatonic patients. Though treatment has a dual effect Dr.Sayer thinks only about positive side where he neglects the negative aspects of the drug. He gives the amount of doses he may feel. This is a point where he acts in an unethical way. Though he has learnt some fundamental things on L-dopa by a chemist, as a doctor he has no idea on the results or side effects of the drug. Even Dr.Sayer is unethical in using his preferable doses for the patients, it give them at least one day of real life that you and me are spending. Also another aspect can be observed. 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. This is also another try of a man at least to know that high doses of L-dopa will not cure the disease.

The fourth principle of medical ethics is justice. It simply means you should treat all patients equally and distribute benefits fairly. When we consider the Dr.Sayer, he always tried to justify his each and every action with his nurses and sometimes even to other doctors. It is well depicted when he fails the drug at the end addresses a gathering saying, "We can hide behind the veil of science and say it was a drug that failed. We don't know what went wrong anymore, than we know what went right."

As a doctor we should earn happiness that we can get by curing patients and make them happy but not just money. In one day all that we did come to us and make our souls happy. After watching this movie, I understood that medical profession is not just a job but it is a profession that we should work with medical ethics.