

# Ethics, an Everyday Issue for Pharmacists

by Timothy E. Welty, Professor and Chair, Department of Pharmacy Practice



## Educational Background:

*B.S. in Pharmacy Butler University; MA Trinity International University; PharmD University of Minnesota; Clinical Research Fellowship in Neuropharmacology and Pharmacokinetics University of Minnesota*

*Prior to coming to the University of Kansas, Dr Welty served on the faculties of Samford University, the University of Alabama Birmingham, the University of Cincinnati, North Dakota State University, and Purdue University. In addition to his academic experience, Dr Welty has extensive experience in hospital and ambulatory pharmacy practice as a pharmacotherapeutic specialist for Methodist Hospital of Indiana in Indianapolis. Additionally he serves as a Commissioner on the Continuing Education Commission for the Accreditation Council on Pharmacy Education. Dr. Welty also works with the Annals of Pharmacotherapy as their Director of Continuing Education.*

## Contact:

Email: [twelty@kumc.edu](mailto:twelty@kumc.edu)

Phone Number: (913) 945-6904 (913) 945-6904 (KUMC)  
(785) 864-4874 (785) 864-4874 (Lawrence)

In this issue of Christianity and Pharmacy, we have attempted to raise a discussion of ethics as it relates to pharmacy as a profession and to practicing pharmacists. Often we associate ethics only with large social issues like abortion, contraception, and end of life decisions. Each of these areas is extremely important, but ethics is much broader and deeper than a handful of issues. The authors of this series of articles have barely scratched the surface of the topic of ethics in pharmacy. It is essentially impossible to cover this topic very well, even in several years of journal issues on ethics. These articles are merely starting points for ongoing discussions and considerations of ethics among Christian pharmacists.

There are at least 2 reasons it is nearly impossible to thoroughly cover the topic of ethics in pharmacy, even in multiple issues of the journal. The first reason is that ethics touches every area of life, personally and professionally. There are very few things that we do where ethics are not involved at some level. Ethics are involved in the way that we treat other people, our family, and even our pets.

Decisions to own a home, garden around our home, purchase things, give toward church or CPFI, or a multitude of other activities are in some way influenced by our ethical standards. For example, is it right to purchase a car when so many people around the world have little to eat, let alone own a vehicle? What should be my response as a Christian to this decision? I am not suggesting that it is wrong for a Christian to own a vehicle, but am saying that at some level ethics are involved in all decisions we make personally. We cannot escape the way that our Christian faith and standards alter the decisions we make in our personal lives.

If this is true for our personal lives, it is also true for us professionally. The ways that we choose to counsel a patient or dispense a medication are influenced by our ethics. For those who own a pharmacy, the way that business is conducted is impacted by ethics. Faculty and preceptor interactions with students are influenced by ethical standards of both the preceptor and the student. All professional situations involve ethical decisions and dilemmas. For example, how do

we handle a patient who requires a medication, but has no way to pay for it? What do we do with a patient who is caught up in drug dependency? Do we treat a patient who embraces a lifestyle we may find repulsive differently than a patient who maintains a more acceptable lifestyle? How do we respond to a patient who we know is an illegal immigrant when he or she seeks care? What is an appropriate way to deal with a student who proves to be unreliable on an advanced pharmacy practice experience? Each of these questions and a myriad of other professional circumstances require ethical decision-making that should be altered by our faith in Christ.

The second reason it is impossible to completely deal with the topic of ethics in any publication, is that new questions and dilemmas always arise. When I started practicing pharmacy over 30 years ago, no one considered the issue of embryonic stem cells and the complex ethical issues surrounding this topic. Only in the past couple of years has the problem of drug shortages become a major concern, involving a number of ethical issues in maintaining a safe, adequate

supply of life-saving medications for patients. With new and innovative technologies being developed for the treatment of diseases, what are the ethical concerns associated with each of these? Is access to medical and pharmacy care a right for individuals? The point of these issues and questions is that none of us can predict the new ethical dilemmas we will face in the profession of pharmacy and healthcare in general. Add to this reality that the Bible likely does not specifically address any of these issues, and we are left in somewhat of a quandary.

So, how are we to deal with the situation in which we find ourselves? Perhaps the best approach to the issue of ethical decision-making is to have a framework within which these types of decisions can be made. This structure should allow us to be flexible in making decisions, provide the ability to deal with various issues and situation that arise, and be solidly based within a Christian context. Establishment of this framework will contain the following elements.

**1. Asking God for wisdom:** When Solomon was confronted with the responsibilities of assuming the throne of Israel, God offered to give anything that Solomon would ask (I Kings 3:1-28). Instead of asking for wealth, power, or other things a king might desire, Solomon asked for wisdom. God was pleased and gave Solomon wisdom. This wisdom allowed Solomon to make wise ethical decisions, as exemplified in the story of 2 women who had babies and one of the children tragically died. Solomon's wisdom was displayed in the way he determined which woman was the true mother of the living child. As a result of this ability, Solomon constantly admonishes us, through the book of Proverbs, to seek wisdom. Godly wisdom enables us to discern truth and righteousness in making ethical decisions.

**2. Asking for the Holy Spirit:** When Jesus talked about the coming of the Holy Spirit, He said that the Holy Spirit would convict us of sin and lead us to know truth (John 16:8-15). Additionally, the Holy Spirit reveals to us all that is from the Father and Son. Immediately after Luke describes his version of Jesus teaching on how to pray, is the story of a father giving good gifts to a son (Luke 11:1-13). Jesus says that if earthly fathers know how to give good gifts the heavenly father knows even better and will give the Holy Spirit. Asking for the Holy Spirit allows us to know the mind of the Father and Son, especially as it relates to what is sinful and untruth. This understanding is essential to ethical dilemmas we face.

**3. Separating cultural perspective from Biblical perspective:** Often in making ethical decisions, there is a cultural overlay that clouds or taints our understanding of the real issues and a solidly Christian approach to the dilemma. In Acts the fledgling church was faced with a major issue that required separating cultural perspective from Biblical perspective. The question they faced was whether to require non-Jewish believers in Christ to follow Jewish traditions. In Acts 15, the church decided that non-Jewish believers would not be required to be circumcised, but did give several basic instructions to these new believers and the church at large. Implications of this decision to separate cultural perspectives from faith in Christ had profound impact on the first century church that extends even to today. The approach and decision of church leadership in Acts 15 can serve as an example to us in separating culture from Christ when we make ethical decisions.

**4. Know and understand Scripture:** In the Bible we have revealed to us the desire and plan of God for mankind. This story entails salvation and an

overview of how God desires people to live. Psalm 119 gives an excellent description of how knowing God's word keeps us from error, sin, and mistakes in judgment. The Psalmist shows an in-depth understanding of the importance of God's word in keeping us on a path of righteousness and justice. Knowing the precepts of God makes solid ethical decision-making essentially second nature and relieves confusion we may encounter in various ethical questions.

When employing these elements in ethical decision-making, there are 2 concepts we must understand. The first is that conclusions we reach in this process may defy conventional thought, even among many Christians. This is not to say that we ignore guidance and wisdom we may receive from fellow believers. However, we must be willing to be obedient to God's instruction and guidance in our lives. Our answers to ethical dilemmas need to be consistent with God's direction, and not entirely dependent on what other people think. Secondly, our responses to ethical questions must be communicated and handled in a manner that displays God's glory and love. A common error that we make is to display solid ethical standards in a way that does not give glory to God and does not allow people to see and know God's love and compassion. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, having all knowledge and being able to understand all mysteries, which includes ethical decisions, is nothing without having love. God's glory and love is the umbrella under which we must make all ethical decisions.

Using these principles will result in immeasurable impact on the world around us, bringing righteousness, compassion, and justice to bear in the most difficult of human situations. May each of us act and speak in the middle of ethical decisions with the mind of Christ.