

Autonomy and Dependency in an Ethic of Care for the Frail Elderly

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Introduction

We have not paid sufficient attention to the ethical dimension of the debate over health care policy for the elderly, especially the frail elderly with chronic conditions and impairments requiring long-term care. We have been absorbed with cost-containment, efficiency and cost effectiveness issues and have tended to pay little attention to the many ethical and moral assumptions inherently related to these issues which are most commonly treated as technical matters.

The social sciences and policy analysis have produced a lot of information useful in the formulation of public policies in many fields, including health care. I do not think, however, that this kind of information alone is enough to develop policies that are best for the populations affected and society as a whole. We must also be prepared to address ethical issues as explicitly as possible and in as open and undistorted a manner as we can manage. The findings from social science research should be used to help construct a consensus, or at least identify points of agreement about the empirical realities of any policy subject addressed. This use of the social sciences can help create a "clearing" in which we can begin to discuss the ethical dimension of the policy issue at hand. The authors I discuss in this essay have incorporated the results of social science research into their work on ethics in precisely this manner, work that should, in my judgment, be given equal weight with the quantitatively oriented policy sciences in the formulation of health and long-term care policies for the frail elderly.