Ethics in Medicine

Benevolent deception, a lie in order to benefit patients, is used by doctors in order to avoid negative effects the direct truth may bring upon patients and their families. This type of deception used by doctors produces both positive and negative results that are unpredictable, making it very controversial. One negative effect that is important to keep in mind is the principle of autonomy, which is violated when patients are deceived. Autonomy is seen when “the patient has the capacity to act intentionally, with understanding, and without controlling influences that would mitigate against a free and voluntary act” (McCormick, 9). Cases will be analyzed in which it may seem permissible to deceive patients as well as those cases that seem impermissible. Distinguishing characteristics between the opposing sides will help us understand ethically moral choices and overall settle the dispute toward the use of benevolent deception. Benevolent deception may be permissible in cases where the benefits affect the patient’s actual health and well being, and should not develop from the fear of telling patients the truth. Doctors are to understand that the entire truth whether relevant or not is best for the patient.

Benevolent Deception, although having many risks can be used to generate positive results such as hope in patients. In the article Hope and Deception, Ruddick argues that the amount of supplementation is very dependent with each disease, medical speciality, and each individual
person \(34\). Doctors must take each case individually and find patients whose criteria fits, resulting in more positive results. Patients that Ruddick labels as self deceivers are patients that will take steps towards avoiding the truth, which results in beliefs of their health being better than it actually is. In this case benevolent deception is permissible and in fact healthy. This particular patient is not pursuing the negative truth, and it is clear that they do not wish to be confronted with it if possible. Instead, the practice of benevolent deception will preserve the hopes that this patient may have resulting in a positive attitude for the patient. Other positive results of benevolent deception include preserving spiritual well being and providing a sense of hope and comfort to patients in dire need. Doctors are able to use this practice in order to resolve negative effects such as in cases where patients may refuse treatments or medications. In this case, benevolent deception is producing a healthier life for the patient who has been given hope and a positive attitude.

In the article, *On Telling Patients the Truth Higgs* makes a respectable stand arguing for the disclosure of all information towards patients. One guideline Higgs follows and all doctors should follow in cases of benevolent deception is to stick to the absolute truth and avoid lies at all costs. Higgs states, “lying must be a last resort, and we should act as if we were to be called upon to defend the decision in public debate”\(19\). However, as doctors chose to deceive patients conflicts may arise. Doctors must evaluate themselves and understand the purpose behind their actions should be to benefit the patient. The driving force should not be fear of telling this individual patient the truth. In cases where the truth may serious harm the patient doctors are providing patients with knowledge of their very own life for the purpose of governing their body
in the most proper manner. When doctors take on this role of deception, they are violating the role of autonomy. Violations of principles are not uncommon as we see surgeons violating the principle of nonmaleficence as they perform surgery on a patient for a better outcome. The same can be said about the doctors of Henrietta Lacks who left out information of infertility following surgery in order to guarantee that she allowed treatment of her cancer. In this case the principle of beneficence is regarded as more valuable than autonomy. Again, each case and patient varies and there may be cases where this is acceptable as illustrated earlier.

Although benevolent deception may be appropriate in certain circumstances, overall the entire truth whether relevant or not is best for the patient. The truth allows patients to understand all parts of their very own situations and eliminate all outside controlling influences. With this type of perspective the principle of autonomy is given priority. This principle should not be changed in any manner such as in the case of William Ruddick’s *Hope and Deception* who defines autonomy in a new sense. Ruddick describes autonomy as “The ability to continue, so far as circumstances allow, the life one embraces” (30). This new definition is used as a way for benevolent deception to snake around the principle of autonomy and should not be followed. In the article *Truth-telling in the doctor-patient relationship: a case analysis*, Sokal has a young patient who would like to donate her kidney to her father. After he discovers that the man receiving the kidney is not her father Sokal understands this is important information that it is relevant to the surgical procedure. The effects of this information may alter his patient’s decision to follow through with the donation of her kidney. Her autonomy is one reason Sokol felt he ought to have let his patient know about the potentially important information. After his patient
received this information she

was able to make a decision with knowledge of all information relevant to the procedure.

Also placed at jeopardy with the practice of benevolent deception is the relationship the patient has with their doctor. It is reasonable to think that in some cases after discussing and coming to conclusions over medical agreements that the patient may find out the actual truth and realize that he or she had been deceived. For example, in the book *The Immortal life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, Henrietta’s husband is quoted “All I remember is that she had this disease, and right after she died they called me in the office wanting to get my permission to take a sample of some kind. I decided not to let them” (5). Henrietta's husband is left with the understanding that no samples would be taken, benefiting his principle of autonomy. Her husband as well as the rest of the family eventually finds out that samples were taken and there are countless cases of trust issues displayed by the family throughout the story. Such as in the case of Deborah stating “Dont make no sense. People got rich off my mother without us even knowin about them takin her cells, now we dont get a dime” (11).

In order to avoid unnecessary controversial conflicts, resolutions in preparation to these troubles seem to be the appropriate path to take. Sokol argues, we should come up with a plan that allows doctors to get feedback from patients on the amount of information each individual patient would like to receive early in the patient-doctor relationship. With this we would be able to match each patient to their preference and avoid certain types of dilemma, providing half of the truth to those whose preference fit, and furthermore preserving the principle of autonomy. Doctors should also work on their delivery of bad news in such a charismatic way, which is to be followed up with support by the doctor providing
feelings of comfort to much needed patients.

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Taking these steps against benevolent deception allows our medical field to grow in areas of morality and ethics.

Benevolent deception may be a tool that can be used to help patients under particular circumstances such as ones previously discussed. However, the path against this deception seems to be a much more rational way to go about medicinal practice, allowing for holds that are limiting medical ethics to be broken. The truth allows the patient and doctor to make the right choices taking in all circumstances that are at hand. One may argue benevolent deception allows doctors to provide what is best for their patient, but when taking a step back and analyzing the situation it seems that each of us would understand what is personally best for us when given all relevant information.