

Bioethics in theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

The first part of this PhD project presents a philosophical analysis of the bioethical theory of the American ethicists Tom L. Beauchamp & James F. Childress. This theory is based on the following principles of biomedical ethics: respect for autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. In the project, the theory of Beauchamp & Childress is compared with the theory of the Danish philosophers Jakob Rendtorff & Peter Kemp which is based on the following ethical principles: autonomy, vulnerability, dignity, and integrity. It is emphasised that the main divergences between the two theories are that they are developed from different philosophical traditions and that Beauchamp & Childress' theory includes positive obligations of autonomy and beneficence, which are not part of Rendtorff & Kemp's theory.

In the second part of the project, with the use of Beauchamp & Childress' ethical principles, the ethical perspectives of RNA interference (RNAi) based therapeutics are analysed. RNAi is considered as a potential therapeutic target for use in disorders like cancer, infectious diseases, and metabolic illnesses. To develop RNAi therapeutics further, it is important to perform an ethical analysis before these therapies are seen as conventional drugs. In this project ethically relevant features for a risk-benefit analysis were identified, and the importance of considering specific issues of respect for autonomy and justice was pointed out. RNAi does not appear to have been analysed from ethical perspectives previously.

The third part of this project contains an empirical study of the ethical considerations and principles of Danish oncology physicians and Danish molecular biologists. The results of this investigation were discussed in relation to the ethical theories of Beauchamp & Childress and Rendtorff & Kemp. It was pointed out that the theory of Rendtorff & Kemp should include positive obligations of autonomy and beneficence to incorporate the results of the current study. It is concluded that the ethical principles of Beauchamp & Childress are related to the ethics of Danish biomedical practice. Apparently, no empirical studies have investigated specifically the importance of the four principles previously, therefore, this empirical study contributes to an enhanced understanding of Beauchamp & Childress' theory from a new point of view.