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## Teaching medical ethics

# Do case studies mislead about the nature of reality?

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts a partial, critical look at the construction and use of case studies in ethics education. It argues that the authors and users of case studies are often insufficiently aware of the literary nature of these artefacts: this may lead to some confusion between fiction and reality. Issues of the nature of the genre, the fictional, story-constructing aspect of case studies, the nature of authorship, and the purposes and uses of case studies as "texts" are outlined and discussed. The paper concludes with some critical questions that can be applied to the construction and use of case studies in the light of the foregoing analysis.*

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"man (*sic*) is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth."<sup>1</sup>

Case studies function as the salvation of ethics teaching and discourse in the modern academy. If principles and practices are discussed in abstract terms, seminar groups and lecture audiences furrow their brows and look puzzled, and, not infrequently, bored. All this changes when a case study is introduced. Suddenly, people are interested and engaged. They identify with the individuals and their positions in the situation described. They start speaking and sharing their own experiences and views. A dead space becomes alive with animated conversation and debate as they become actively involved in deliberation and dialogue. There is nothing like a good case study for arousing interest, gaining attention, ensuring engagement, enabling participation, unleashing the tongues of the shy and reticent and racking out the range of possible views, opinions and interpretations that can apply to any particular ethical issue or situation. Case studies introduce context,

persons, emotions and realism into what can otherwise be abstract and sterile theoretical debate that, at its worst, can seem to be irrelevant wit-sharpening and logic chopping for its own sake. Discussion around case studies is the nearest approximation to some kind of democratic Socratic dialogue that many people are ever likely to experience. In it, sharp questions are raised in a clear and memorable way, concepts are clarified and, it is to be hoped, moral awareness and the relevance (or lack thereof) of at least some moral theory to practice is established.

The argument for the use of case studies makes itself; our purpose here is not to decry that use. However, given the often uncritical use of vignettes and case studies in ethics teaching, it seems important to place this teaching medium within some kind of critical framework. Case-study-based teaching is now common and well established in "problem-based" medical education in the UK and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It therefore seems entirely proper at this juncture to raise some critical issues about the construction and use of case studies so that they can be used with greater discrimination and awareness.

One recent philosophical critic of the case-study method in health care ethics teaching, Christopher Coope, has pointed out three of the limitations and dangers of using case studies. Case studies tend to focus upon particular problems in such a way that they suggest that problems and controversy form the whole of morality and ethical discourse. There is a problem about being clear about what actually should count as a distinctively moral problem. Finally, there is the danger that case studies may suggest and make thinkable and discussable options and modes of practice that are in fact immoral, thus promoting immoral rather than more moral practice.<sup>3</sup> This might be usefully amplified here by adding that, in focusing upon crises and problems, case studies may actually reinforce and give publicity to dramatically bad practice rather than emphasising and using examples of good everyday practice. There is, perhaps,

a natural temptation to favour the dramatic over the apparently mundane to gain the attention of busy students and practitioners, but this must not be allowed to occur uncritically.

In this paper, a range of issues that may supplement Coope's concerns are raised with a view to stimulating debate and constructing a critical agenda of review around the use of case studies. If Coope is chiefly preoccupied with the way in which the content of case studies can distort perceptions that people have about the nature of morality, we are more concerned with the way in which their form and usage can mislead about the nature of reality. The issues and "agenda points" listed and briefly considered here are not exhaustively considered. They are all, in one way or another, loosely related to the issue of the ways in which it is ethical to compile and use case studies for use in ethics teaching. It must be emphasised that this is not an epistemological, ontological or strictly philosophical discussion. It is an exercise in what might be called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" which draws generally upon critical literary notions about texts in order to raise questions about the construction and use of case studies.<sup>4-5</sup> The aim is to expand discussion of the use of case studies in teaching beyond the familiar issue of confidentiality.

Many of the critical points made here are related to one of the main strengths of case studies, their apparent verisimilitude. Case studies are, of course, oral or literary artefacts. Like television programmes, case studies may be drawn from and reflect reality. However, the constructed, edited nature of case studies tends to be forgotten because of the immediacy and reality they appear to present. It is this amnesia, or suspension of disbelief, and the implications of this that come under scrutiny here, for it has many potentially important ethical and pedagogical implications.

Case studies, however realistic they may seem in terms of scope, detail, emotional depth and so on, are authored, or at least, edited works. Authors are human beings with their own presuppositions, biases, viewpoints, interests and blind spots. Insofar as case studies are creations of somebody's capacities of observation, imagination, interpretation, redaction, recension and expression, they are susceptible to the same kind of ethical or political critique as any other artefact such as a novel or a television programme.<sup>6</sup> Above all, they must not be seen as simply "true" and accurate accounts of reality. Around the written or spoken text of a case study all the issues that rightly surround any text assemble themselves. These often

have profound implications for the status of case studies and what may or may not be learned from them.

### **Truth or fiction? - the problem of genre**

Part of the charm of case studies is that they appear to be drawn from real life and to reflect the actuality of a particular situation. Once a case study is perceived to be a text, however, it becomes obvious that it has only an indirect, or partial, correspondence with reality. To create any kind of order, elements must be separated and ordered in a diachronic way. A narrative is created, some characters, significant events and actions are rendered visible while others are discarded, often quite unconsciously. Those who have ever participated in the making of a "factual" television programme will be all too well aware of how significant elements are excluded and others are "streamlined" or massaged so that a decent, orderly story line that makes sense and is of interest to viewers is created. At the same time, "extra" features may be added or elaborated to gain audience attention. This is an inevitable part of turning a maelstrom of data, which may in fact be contradictory or conflicting, into some kind of intelligible information that will be of interest to an audience.

This raises the question, what is the status of the "text" when it is completed? There are many kinds of truthful and illuminative discourse that do not claim to be factual, poetry and novels being but two examples. When it comes to case studies, it is worth considering the question, are they more nearly analogous in terms of genre to fiction and poetry or to, say, the information about calorie content on the back of a packet of crisps or to the train times on a timetable? It seems plausible to suggest that case studies are much nearer, often, to the genre of story or tale than they are to objective reportage or description. This is not to decry their value; fiction is a very good way, if not the best way, of engaging people in serious thought experiments about profound issues.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, "classic" fiction such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or George Eliot's *Middlemarch* allows a complexity of viewpoints on reality that makes it of great practical and pedagogical value. Fiction should not, however, be uncritically conflated with fact and reality.

From a post-modern, post-structuralist perspective, drawing the kind of distinction made here between linguistic "artefacts" and "reality" is, of course, questionable. Living in post-modern worlds, such a distinction constitutes making a contrast between two different, perhaps complementary, linguistic artefacts or tools. From this

perspective, the foregrounding of the case study can be interpreted as the privileging of one discourse over another. From a post-modern point of view, there need not be anything wrong with this as long as it is done with an appropriate degree of Derridan playfulness. Ironically, it may be that case studies may often seem to have more “reality” than events and characters in everyday life. They make sense, ie are coherent, meaningful and informative, to those who are meant to learn from them. In this sense they may be said to be more “real” for learners than reality. None the less, realism in this sense in the case-study form is a teaching aid and such studies are to be thought of as pointers and signposts rather than as pictures of “real life” which may actually appear to be less coherent, meaningful, informative, etc. The very features of case studies which make them artefacts are also the ones which make them useful as pointers towards reality. In this connection, it is worth noting that many of the most “useful” stories, morality tales, myths and so on have been the most “unreal”, their “unreality” making a fundamental contribution to their power.<sup>8</sup>

### **Stranger than truth: creating truthful stories**

Those who create and present case studies may see themselves as closer to reporters describing events accurately along quasi-scientific observational lines rather than as authors of truthful fictions. Yet a moment’s reflection reveals that many of the elements that characterise successful fiction are also to be found in the work of case-study authors. In the first place, they do not bore their readers by including too much detail about persons, events and relevant factors. A small segment of time is chosen. Though in reality cases have antecedent factors and consequences that may be enormously important for participants, these may be excluded for narrative economy and clarity. Some events and characters that might have been relevant at the time are excluded or only sketchily included. Only some characters and aspects of the situation concerned are fleshed out as credible and significant; others which may have been present are ignored. Sometimes, characters are presented in stereotypical terms suggested by including only a very few things about them and their circumstances. This is helpful in creating the necessary dramatic tension in the form of a dilemma which provides the all important sustaining narrative with the tension that will provide interest for the audience (what will happen? what did they do in the end?). A successful story may be said to consist of an undergirding narrative that

sustains a plot with some kind of tension (for example, between good and evil) in which events of some kind occur and characters participate. Without these elements, stories become boring, inconsequential or frustrating.<sup>9</sup> It is precisely these elements that case studies must provide, albeit in an attenuated or low-key way, if they are to evoke the gratifying engagement of an audience. Once again, there is nothing heinous about creative artifice - why not draw on the mainstream culture of the last 2000 years to teach effectively - but there is some virtue in being aware of what one is doing, and why.

### **Cherchez l’ecrivain!**

If case studies are stories or tales then they have authors. Often, these authors present themselves merely as scribes or recorders. They think they tell it like it happened and modestly disavow their own artistry and contrivance. Authors have their own biases, prejudices, interests, values and, above all, viewpoints. They have their own histories and personal experiences which lead them to regard some events, narratives, or aspects of situations as significant and meaningful while others may be ignored. Those who write or teach in higher education are often of high social status and many possess the attributes of articulacy and literacy. They may, in a sense, live off telling stories. Their position may contrast starkly with that of service users who may not have high social status, a sense of autonomy and access to literacy and who may therefore easily become “passive victims” or objects of the case-study author’s activity.<sup>10</sup> Issues of power and politics cannot be divorced from the case-study author’s activity. All these factors come into play in the compilation of case studies.

Since it is seldom the users of health or social care who writes their own case studies or accounts of events, case-study authors, like novelists, have almost free rein to provide their own interpretations of who or what was or was not significant etc. Indeed, the case-study writer can attribute whatever s/he likes to whomsoever s/he likes because, for the most part, s/he has probably already decided to anonymise the case to be presented and therefore will not need to check back with the agents involved what their perceptions of events were. (Of course, if the author is a member of a clinical team whose work is ongoing, this sort of cavalier disregard may not be either tactful or practical.) Emotional and value nuance can be subtly added to events and characters with a few deft strokes of the pen. The author has the power to implant particular moral issues, to change the plot, to resolve the issues, and even, supremely, to draw the moral at the end of the

tale. In this way, case studies can become prime examples of *eisegesis* in which the author injects and creates the issues, problems and principles which are then presented as being discovered. The author puts his thumb into the case-study pie, and, *mirabile dictu*, finds exactly the issues and principles that are required for illustrative or teaching purposes. Thus, while purporting to be about the world “out there”, case studies may actually more accurately reflect the mind of the author. This is somewhat ironic given the reaction against hypotheticals in favour of “real people” in much of the literature on medical ethics.<sup>11</sup>

The important point to recognise here is that authorship conveys enormous power and privilege in the way that reality and values are construed in a case study. Issues of ownership of the story, whose version of things is rendered visible, and viewpoint are often allowed to remain implicit. They need to become much more apparent. Of course, to stand outside a story and criticise or deconstruct it from a literary point of view is in some ways to spoil its effect and to make it less captivating. However, education into ethics is *inter alia* a training in analysis, reasoning and evaluation of evidence and data, not an invitation to lose oneself in powerful if covert fictions. These stories that do not present as stories need to be exposed and recognised as the fictions that they effectively are if they are really to be emancipating for audiences. This lends a different, but complementary meaning to Dan Callahan’s perception that clinical ethics may need to be delivered from “the tyranny of the story”.<sup>12</sup>

### Parables, plays and proof texts

Case studies vary considerably in terms of length, style, content, issues considered, and so on. Like other kinds of literary and oral artefact, they can also be constructed and used in very different ways.

Some seem to be constructed basically with a view to being parables that pose questions intended to evoke particular responses from the audience. They may be tailored to the likely needs of particular groups such as nurses or other health care workers.<sup>13</sup> Others seem to function as morality plays in which stereotypical characters and events are used to clothe and present standard moral principles and viewpoints in such a way that Every health worker can recognise his own position and identify the right path for himself.

Some case studies are used by practitioners to demonstrate their own ethical bravado and skill; “Yes, this really did happen to me! It was hell!” A related use lies in creating and perpetuating stereotypes for the purposes of inter-professional pugi-

lism. Thus, doctors create case studies that make social workers look incompetent or stupid, while nurses present doctors as arrogant and insensitive.

Sometimes, case studies may effectively be a kind of voyeuristic entertainment. While purporting to deal with serious matters of ethics and care they are presented in a sensationalistic way which renders the client or service user passive, evil, or both, while the “brave, conscientious health workers” make difficult decisions and get on with doing the best they can. This may be deeply unappealing and is possibly morally objectionable in some instances.

One of the commonest uses for case studies and case vignettes is to illustrate points and conflicts of ethical principle. This is the use of cases and case studies as “proof texts”. It seems inoffensive, so long as it is recognised that anecdotal authority has all the authority of the person using the anecdote and that there might be countervailing texts which deprive this particular instance of its quality of knock-down proof.

### Towards a more critical approach to case studies

Case studies are among the best and most powerful tools for ethics education that are presently available, reflecting as they do the inextricable connection between narrative and moral knowledge and experience. Nothing that has been said here should be construed as an argument against their use in teaching and research. However, now that the case-study method is so well established, it is time, in the interests of being truthful and responsible, to take a more critical look at the construction and use of case studies so that they can be used in a more discerning and self-critical way. Teachers and students of ethics need to become more aware of the constructed, artificial nature of case studies as part of their development into people of moral sophistication and awareness. It may be disillusioning to see case studies as reality-reflecting (and distorting) fictional tales rather than factual reportage. It can, however, also be liberating. Individuals can reflect upon their construction and choice of cases and what it tells them about their own worldviews, values and prejudices. They might even be able to open their minds and imaginations further in the interests of thinking more unconstrainedly about the nature of situations and problems. This allows freedom of analysis and expression that might be constrained by the daunting thought that case studies are depicting reality. At the very least, this perspective allows an appropriate evaluation of case studies as evidence which is surely important

if they are to be seen in proportion and used with proper ethical awareness in education and research.

In concrete terms, it is possible, when faced with a case study, to ask the following questions, which all have important ethical and value implications:

- What genre does this case study fall into?
- What kind of language or languages are being used in this case study (medical, legal, formal, informal, slang) and what are the implications of this for the impact of the study?
- What relation does this account bear to the reality of the situation that it appears to record?
- What aspects of this case study make it immediate, gripping and engaging (or not)? What literary and rhetorical devices have been used to engage the attention?
- What kind of order has been imposed on this account of events and persons by its author?
- What elements, persons, perspectives, viewpoints, contexts etc have been excluded from this case study? Why might this be?
- What literary devices such as narrative, plot, characterisation, description and rhetoric have been used in constructing this account? What are the implications of this for the ways that ethical and other issues emerge?
- Who is the author of this account and what are the author's own biases, prejudices, interpretative frameworks, blind spots, values, viewpoints? How would the account have differed if it had been constructed from someone else's point of view? What are the power dynamics inherent in the construction of an account that is only written from one person's point of view? Do the factors that have been excluded in fact reflect important exclusions of issues and values in actual practice? What are these issues and values?<sup>14</sup>
- What are the values and presuppositions that have been concealed within the story that is the case study?
- For what purposes, overt and covert, has this account been constructed, and how is it being used (moral vindication, bravado, professional pugilism, voyeurism, parabolic instruction, etc)? Who is getting what out of the construction of this case study?
- Who has set this case study for consideration for teaching and learning and for what purpose? What are the implications of this in terms of interests, biases etc?

## Conclusion

Clearly, encouraging a critical attitude towards case studies may in itself be problematic. In the short term, it may well get in the way of teaching practitioners and students, many of whom may be lured into the study of ethics by the promise that problem-based learning via the use of case studies really does mirror actual practice. Ultimately, however, there can be little excuse for the ethics teacher not to subject this kind of learning device to the same kind of critical scrutiny that he or she is trying to engender in students. Case studies must be recognised and criticised as value-laden artefacts in both construction and method. Much of their power to enthrall and educate comes from the employment of fictional artistry by their authors. They should be perceived, used, appreciated and enjoyed as the fictions that they in fact are.

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