

Chapter 5 Issue L - Informed Consent

- 5.1 Professional guidance about concepts of informed consent evolved considerably during the period 1984-1995 and has continued to develop. It is important to bear in mind that in the past, ethical advice was drawn up principally by professional bodies against a background of shared presumptions, such as the doctor's duty to benefit and never harm patients. Benefit was often seen as striving to prolong life by whatever means available and therapeutic interventions were not generally envisaged as being potentially harmful since extension of life was their goal. With the increasing integration of other viewpoints, such as those of lawyers, ethicists and patient representatives, medical ethical guidance has progressively developed a strong emphasis on patient autonomy. Fundamental notions of benefit and harm which were relatively unquestioned at the beginning of this period have come under critical scrutiny and are increasingly defined in terms of what individual patients want from medicine (which may be non-intervention) rather than purely in terms of what doctors consider beneficial.
- 5.2 Changing expectations about the scope of doctors' duties are demonstrated by the attached extracts from the BMA's published guidance on medical ethics. In 1984, the BMA published a revised edition of its ethics handbook¹² which aimed to provide guidance for doctors on a range of issues. The issue of patient consent, including consent of minors is briefly covered, with little mention of parental consent. There was a clear expectation that doctors would not proceed without valid consent but the steps entailed in seeking that consent were not explored. The equivalent publication in 1993, *Medical Ethics Today* featured over 30 pages of advice on the topic of consent generally and a separate chapter on aspects of treatment of children¹³. In the interim period between these two publications, BMA ethical guidance tried pro-actively to encourage much greater recognition of the importance of patient/parent informed consent to treatment.