Ethics & Evidence

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The views expressed in this presentation are those of Dr. Sulmasy and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues
Background

• Evidence-based bioethics:
  – trivial or substantive?

• “Empirical turn”
  – Sociologists
  – Physicians
Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM)

“The conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the current best evidence in making decisions about the medical care of the individual patients”

David Sackett, 1996
Evidence-Based Ethics (EBE)

“The conscientious and judicious use of the best evidence concerning the care and prognosis of the individual patient in making ethical decisions”

Tyson and Stoll, 2003
What are the possible aims of EBE?

• Use best available data
• Broaden data: “thick” description
• Repudiate emotivism & act intuitionism
• Expunge cognitive biases
What are the possible aims of EBE?

- Eliminate all case-based reasoning
- Eliminate rules, principles, theories, & reason
- Give pride of place to numbers
- Implicit utilitarianism
Utilitarianism is not purely empirical ethics

• Utilitarianism can’t be proven empirically
• Which form of utilitarianism?
• Who (or what) is included in the moral calculus?
• Predictions are not evidence
"It's a government funded study to find out how many wrongs make a right."
What role can evidence play?

- Naturalistic fallacy (is/ought distinction)
  - Historicist
  - Populist
  - Authoritative
  - Biological
What role can evidence play?

• Surveys
  – Assess agreement
  – Measure frequency of behaviors

• Assess slippery slope arguments

• Policy experiments

• Describe how positions have come about
  – History
  – Statistical associations
What role can evidence play?

• Test falsifiable assumptions in bioethical arguments
• Clarify bioethical questions
• Establish factual premises in bioethical arguments
• Case reports
  – Casuistry
• Sociological & anthropological background
• Experimental moral psychology
Conclusions

• Evidence plays a key role
• EBE must be humble
  – Life-long learning
  – Using the best evidence
  – Avoid cognitive biases
  – Clear about all the facts of the case
• Empirical research about clinical ethics can help
• Ethics is never based on evidence alone