

# Ethics & Evidence



**Daniel P. Sulmasy, MD, PhD**

**The Department of Medicine & Divinity School  
The University of Chicago**

**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?

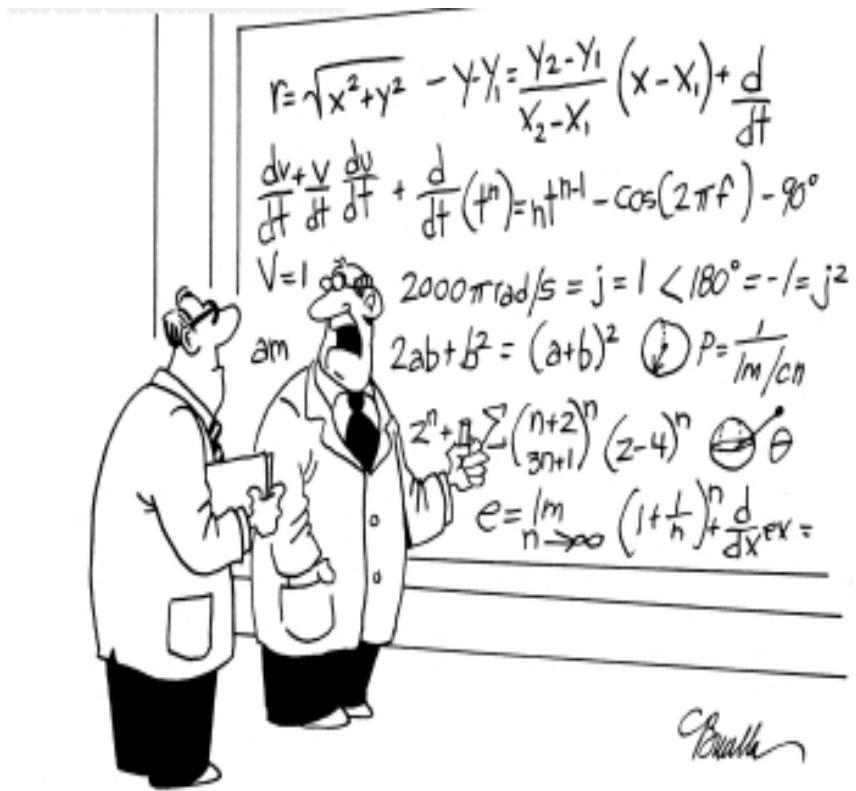
- Use best available data
- Broaden data: “thick” description
- Repudiate emotivism & act intuitionism
- Expunge cognitive biases

# 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



Brattvaag

"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