Health professionals Policy makers Patients and public Ethical, legal and social implications Research Craniofacial anomalies Patients' rights Formalized in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes “the inherent dignity” and the “equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family”. And it is on the basis of this concept of the person, and the fundamental dignity and equality of all human beings, that the notion of patient rights was developed. In other words, what is owed to the patient as a human being, by physicians and by the state, took shape in large part thanks to this understanding of the basic rights of the person.

Patients' rights vary in different countries and in different jurisdictions, often depending upon prevailing cultural and social norms. Different models of the patient-physician relationship—which can also represent the citizen-state relationship—have been developed, and these have informed the particular rights to which patients are entitled. In North America and Europe, for instance, there are at least four models which depict this relationship: the paternalistic model, the informative model, the interpretive model, and the deliberative model. Each of these suggests different professional obligations of the physician toward the patient. For instance, in the paternalistic model, the best interests of the patient as judged by the clinical expert are valued above the provision of comprehensive medical information and decision-making power to the patient. The informative model, by contrast, sees the patient as a consumer who is in the best position to judge what is in her own interest, and thus views the doctor as chiefly a provider of information. There continues to be enormous debate about how best to conceive of this relationship, but there is also growing international consensus that all patients have a fundamental right to privacy, to the confidentiality of their medical information, to consent to or to refuse treatment, and to be informed about relevant risk to them of medical procedures.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been instrumental in enshrining the notion of human dignity in international law, providing a legal and moral grounding for improved standards of care on the basis of our basic responsibilities towards each other as members of the “human family”, and giving important guidance on critical social, legal and ethical issues. But there remains a great deal of work to be done to clarify the relationship between human rights and right to health, including patient rights. Recognizing this challenge, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNHCR) has designated a Special Rapporteur to provide it with a report that examines and clarifies the broader relationship between human rights and the right to health. This report has great importance for the World Health Organization, whose mission is to ensure “health for all”. Grounding this mission in a fundamental human right to health would be an important milestone, and a great step forward realizing this goal.

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