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Dignity and health: A review

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Abstract

Attention to dignity is thriving in health. However, much of this recent discourse ignores the broader scholarship pertaining to dignity. The purpose of this review is to synthesize a wide range of multidisciplinary writing in order to put recent discussions of dignity and health into a broader context. The review explicates two main meanings of dignity—human dignity and social dignity, and looks at how these two ideas are used in the arenas of human rights, law, social justice, bioethics, and clinical care, and suggests some implications of these meanings and uses for health research and advocacy.

Keywords: Dignity; Human rights; Law; Social justice; Bioethics; Health care

> "To be able to say what dignity is would be to describe the fundamental meaning of being human" (Meeks, 1984, ix).

Attention to dignity is thriving in health research and advocacy. Interview-based studies of sick or aged individuals reveal the importance of dignity to the experience of receiving care (Chochinov, Hack, Hassard et al., 2002; Chochinov, Hack, McClement, Kristjanson, & Harlos, 2002; Jacelon, Connelly, Brown, Proulx, & Vo, 2004). In surveys of health care quality, dignity serves as an indicator in the measurement of both physician and system responsiveness (Blanchard & Lurie, 2004; Blendon et al., 2002; World Health Organization, 2000). Dignity is a key concept in clinical ethics (Chochinov, 2002; Lothian & Philp, 2001; Pannuti & Tanneberger, 1993; Pullman, 1999, 2001, 2002) and professional practice (Jacobs, 2000, 2001; Mairis, 1994; Priester, 1992; Shotton & Seedhouse, 1998; Soderberg, Gilje, & Norberg, 1997), as well as in international bioethics and biolaw (Andorno, 2003; Beyleveld & Brownsword, 2001; Feldman, 1999; Gurnham, 2005; Petermann, 1996). Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, has argued that dignity should serve as a guiding principle for the global health movement (Horton, 2004). Health and human rights advocates suggest that dignity may be a link that explains the relationship between the promotion and protection of human rights and health status (Mann et al., 1999). The UN call for a "right to health" assumes a reciprocal relationship between health and dignity when it describes health as a prerequisite to "living a life in dignity" (General Comment No. 14, 2000).

The fields of philosophy, theology, law, and political theory all have long histories of inquiry into dignity, yet much of the recent discourse about dignity in health ignores this broader scholarship, or makes reference to only isolated parts of it. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize a wide range of multidisciplinary writing on dignity in order to

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put recent discussions of dignity in health into a broader context. It draws upon close reading and analysis of approximately 150 articles, books, theses, and reports. This sample, while only a small portion of the estimated 1200 books and 11,000 articles about dignity published in English since 1970 (Witte, 2003), encompasses examples of theoretical and empirical work from all of the disciplines that have applied themselves to the study of dignity and includes many of the pieces recognized as highly influential to contemporary scholarship.

A brief history of dignity

Historical notions of dignity situate the concept in three key relationships: between humanity and God, between the individual and society, and between determinism and freedom. In the Bible and throughout the Christian middle ages, dignity was construed as a quality possessed by humanity because of its unique relationship to God. Human beings were made in the image of God and thus on the ladder of creation stood above all other creatures, second only to the angels (Bayertz, 1996; Dales, 1977; Gaylin, 1984; Hailer & Ritschl, 1996; Kristeller, 1948; Moody, 1998). This special status lent a sacred value or worth to all human life. By contrast, classical Greek ideas about dignity derived from an understanding of society as rigidly hierarchical. Dignity was ascribed to certain individuals or groups by virtue of their place, or rank, in that structure (Johnson, 1971). The idea of dignity thus referred not to an absolute and sacred worth, but a relative and social one. (A corollary to this definition of dignity was the idea that certain behavior was "dignified" by its association with nobility or high rank.) During the Renaissance, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man* located dignity in the ability of human beings to exercise will and choice (Kristeller, 1948): "according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shall desire" (Pico, G. D. M. 1948 [1468], p. 224). Immanuel Kant's notion of dignity integrated several of these earlier ideas. He wrote of dignity as a quality belonging to all sentient human beings because of their capacity for rationality and moral freedom (Dillon, 1995; Gaylin, 1984; Meyer, 1987; Pullman, 2001). This dignity carried with it the obligation that human beings be treated with respect—as reflected in the well-known Kantian dictum that people should be regarded as ends in themselves and never just as means. Following Kant, political philosophers like Edmund Burke, Thomas Hobbes, Mary Wollonstonecraft, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stewart Mill all made use of the idea of dignity (Hayry, 2004; Horton, 2004; Meyer, 1987; Moody, 1998). While there was no unanimity of definition among these writers, they did successfully shift dignity from a concept understood only as a religious or philosophical notion, to one with many sociopolitical meanings and implications (Bayertz, 1996).

The meanings of dignity

The concept of dignity is "complex, ambiguous and multivalent" (Moody, 1998, p. 14). Many authors have noted the vagueness of the term (Becker, 2001; Feldman, 2000; Harris, 1997; Jacobs, 2000; Pullman, 2001; Schachter, 1983; Spiegelberg, 1970) and the "inner tension and contradiction" (Bayertz, 1996, p. 87) revealed when dignity is placed under scrutiny. Indeed, dignity has been described as an objective phenomenon and as an subjective one (Feldman, 1999; Jacelon et al., 2004; Nordenfelt, 2004; Schachter, 1983; Seltser & Miller, 1993); as public and as private (Arnason, 1998; Meyer 1989); as individual and as collective (Andorno, 2003; Dillon, 1995; Gaylin, 1984; Nordenfelt, 2003; Paust, 1984); as internal and intrinsic and as external and extrinsic (Jacelon, 2003; Jacelon, 2004; Mann, 1998; Miller & Keys, 2001; Soderberg et al., 1997; Spiegelberg, 1970); as hierarchical and as democratic (Dillon, 1995; Hayry, 2004; Kielkopf, 1971; Kristeller, 1948); and as unconditional and static and as contingent and dynamic (Gewirth, 1992; Kovach, 1995; Tunstall, 1985); as inherent, bestowed, or achieved (Dales, 1977; George, 1998; Kolnai, 1995; Zhang, 2000); and as descriptive and prescriptive (Kolnai, 1995; Moller, 1990; Pullman, 1999). The conceptual confusion extends to the language of dignity. For example, appellations like basic dignity, human dignity, social dignity, and personal dignity abound in the literature (Chochinov, 2002; Dillon, 1995; Jacelon, 2003; Kielkopf, 1971; Kolnai, 1995; Mann, 1998; Moller, 1990; Nordenfelt, 2004; Pullman, 1996; Spiegelberg, 1970; Szarwarski, 1986), but there appears to be little consensus about the definition and use of these terms.