

Triage in terms of medicine and ethics

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are exposed to countless extraordinary events provoked by the nature or by themselves. When the available resources fail to satisfy the medical needs of numerous injured people and patients in such circumstances, triage application which means "selecting, sorting" is indispensable. This paper examines the medical ethics evaluation of triage and its position in Islam.

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Human beings strive to preserve and maintain their existence of both physical and moral values since their emergence in the world. However, they sometimes fail in this effort resulting from their own faults or mass disasters and catastrophes which do not occur under the control of their own will, and in such extraordinary circumstances dozens of human beings lose their lives and many of them are subject to severe and painful occasions. We are exposed to such news on mass casualty events since communication and information media have been developing rapidly. There is a call for international aid almost every week because of an extraordinary event occurring in any country. In the last 20 years, humane crises are more frequent and widespread. Obviously, the number of extraordinary events is to increase in the future.¹ It is a fact that mass casualty events caused by human beings or by the nature are inevitable in the world. The attitudes to be taken in such a circumstance, namely, the efforts exercised to lessen the impacts of mass disaster, are of great importance.² In this study, we examine the significance of "triage application" known as a process of medical decision and preference to ensure that all people receive care in case of an extraordinary event to lessen the effects of mass disaster. We handle triage in terms of medical ethics and viewpoint of Islamic philosophy. Before getting into the details of the subject, defining certain basic

notions and providing brief information on triage will facilitate the conception of the subject.

Extraordinary incidents or medical disasters. American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) defines medical disasters as "situations in which destructive effects of an event provoked by the nature or human beings exceed the available resources required by a community or region in need of medical care". In other words, "all situations which require additional specific implementations in case of the inadequacy of routine medical services" are regarded as extraordinary incidents.³ In case of extraordinary incidents caused by human beings or by the nature (or more simple events such as a traffic accident whose number of victims is more than one) the available means may not suffice to provide treatment or care for a great number of injured people. Triage application is required in such circumstances.

Triage. The word "triage" comes from French word "trier" which means "to sort". Much of the credit for modern day triage has been attributed to the famous French surgeon Baron Dominique Jean Larrey (1766-1842), a surgeon in Napoleon's army who devised a method to evaluate and categorize the wounded in battle and then evacuate those requiring the most urgent medical attention. He instituted these practices while battle was in

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progress and triaged patients with no regard to rank.^{4,5}

Nature of triage. The medical staff (or team) which arrives first to the scene of incident engages in the evaluation of the situation and the provision of additional staff and materials. Triage is a process which must be directed in the scene of incident by the person who has had the most advanced medical training. This person (or team) is responsible for initiating the triage as well. To this end, the first tour of triage is realized and dead people and patients who are severely injured and not expected to survive are eliminated in this first tour of triage. Although this application seems cruel and insensible, because of time and personnel limitation these patients do not receive medical care for a while for the benefit of other patients are likely to be rescued.

Triage application. Triage is taken over by a more experienced medical staff when they come to the scene. The evaluation of triaging the patients should be maintained in order for the application to go on in accordance with its objectives. Triage should be restructured at every medical step the injured or patient experiences, taking account of the changing conditions. The basic principle of triage is doing the most for the most. The priority in triage can be summarized as follows: *life>extremity>function>cosmetics*.

The injured and patients are categorized into 4 in terms of triage applications: 1) Dead people or very severely injured patients who are not expected to survive are in the last category. If the resources are limited; these patients should be sacrificed for the benefit of other patients who are most likely to be rescued. 2) The first priority is given to the patients who are in need of emergent care and transportation to a hospital. These patients should be first provided treatment at the scene and then transported to a hospital as soon as possible. These groups of patients may be suffering from such problems as cardiac arrest, severe hemorrhage, open wounds in the abdomen or chest, severe trauma, threat of shock and additional grave medical problems which worsen the health condition of the patient (poisoning, diabetes and its complications, cardiac problems, pregnancy and so forth) 3) The second priority is given to patients whose treatment and transportation can be delayed temporarily. These patients may be suffering from the following injuries: burns without complications severe, open, multiple fractures, injuries in the eye and stable internal injuries. 4) Delayed injuries (walking patients). The treatment and transportation of these patients may be delayed. These patients may be suffering from the following: broken bones, cuts, soft tissue injuries and injuries holding little medical importance.

According to a system which is internationally recognized, casualties are given the following colored triage labels: red stands for injuries of immediate priority; yellow stands for injuries of medium priority; green stands for injuries of low priority and black stands for severely injured patients who are not expected to live.³

Triage, which aims to provide help and care for as many as injured persons or patients within limited opportunities in case of a disaster, is an indispensable application based on knowledge, experience and norms.

Triage and ethics. The focus of ethics is human actions. However, the subject of ethics is not all kinds of activities or actions, but the actions that are concerned with morality. Ethical judgments derive from problems of value. The reason for the emergence of problems of value is certainly the difference of thought, approach and viewpoints among human beings not only in individual relationships but also in relations of any individual with society and organizational structures of society and in human relations at different levels.⁶ However, on certain subjects similar behaviors are displayed all over the world. "Triage" is among these subjects in terms of its application and approaches. It is an application which poses primary ethical problems due to limited treatment resources to be offered to many victims who are in various health situations.^{7,8} Under these circumstances, persons who offer medical service have to take account of the principles and rules referred to the national and international documents. These principles and rules have been mostly shaped by the influence of historical tradition of medical profession which developed throughout centuries.

Extraordinary situations pose various problems and proposals of solution to these problems. Physicians and other medical workers may have to re-question and evaluate the system of moral values. Medical, ethical and religious deadlocks and new questions to be replied may bring about during this evaluation process. It is of great importance to question in a detailed way such as which matters deteriorate humane values, what are the positive and negative impacts of extraordinary events on our lives, which moral values are of primary importance to share an honorable and prestigious life.⁹

The principle of "beneficence" primarily and above all requires being beneficial when providing medical service. The priority is given to the benefit of the patient at any situation. The principle of "beneficence" offers 2 different principles, which are "providing absolute benefit" and "providing the balance between benefits and harms".¹⁰⁻¹² As for extraordinary situations, any medical staff should aim to rescue as many persons as possible who are expected to survive.

Medical workers may not agree on the priorities while evaluating different factors concerning benefit and harm. As Frankena states, a medical worker should not cause harm, prevent and eliminate harm and provide benefit. However, these 4 acts should not be considered as a total obligation. Triage is certainly the most striking case in which a categorization of priority was carried out, and some of the abovementioned acts are regarded as obligations. The categorization of injured people is not only a medical requirement but also an ethical must. Triage, which is a helpful method for the medical team providing emergency medical care, signifies that medical requirements are congruent with ethical requirements.⁷

The help to be provided in extraordinary situations does not take the will of patient into account. During the provision of this help, the physician should take account of the emergency of the situation and not depend on judgments based on race, religion, ethnicity, political thought, age, gender, and so forth. The relations with the victims should be established within the framework of personal rights and, if possible, the consent of the patient should be taken for emergency aid processes.¹³ When the demands exceed the resources, the most ethical act will be to make the society feel that everyone has the right to equal access to the available resources. However, it is not ethical to use the resources for desperate cases instead of using them for the patients who are more likely to be rescued. The basic principle of triage is doing the most for the most. An act which is fair for a patient should not be unfair for the others; optimal care which involves technological care as well as mental/emotional care should be provided to minimize morbidity. The care which concerns the ones who have lost their lives should involve the comprehension of psychological condition of their families, respect for their grief and support to these people.

The primary characteristic of Mill and Bentham's conception of ethics is that it does not depend on human acts but on the results and benefits of human acts. Anything that does the most for the most is the superior "good" in terms of ethics. This idea is fully parallel to the basic principle of triage.^{14,15} The respect for conventions and beliefs of patients is among the basic principles that physicians are expected to comply with. People providing medical care during a triage application may find themselves looking for the responds of medical and ethical questions as well as questions on religious matters concerning this application.

Ethics and theology are tied to each other since they both relate ethical actions to a normative basis. Theology attaches great importance to practical ethics more than theoretical evaluations. Bioethical thought cannot be separated from the religion itself

because religion refers to continuity and totality between body and reason, substance and spirit, ethics and law.¹⁶

While evaluating medical applications in terms of bioethical thought, it is known that "religion and belief" which hold an ethical importance in physician-patient relations should be taken into consideration. It will be helpful to find out the Islamic viewpoint in respect of triage to enlighten the Muslim population which consists of one-third of world population on how to act against triage application.

The viewpoint of Islam on triage. Before handling this issue in detail, it is important to determine the general outlines of Islamic perspective of life. Islamic philosophy recognizes that life has a dynamic, not a static structure, thus, attitudes and behaviors of human beings may change with the conditions which evolve and develop throughout time and new problems may emerge. The problems should be handled on the basis of principles determined within the framework of resources they refer to instead of tackling with them individually. These principles are universal and have the depth which allows them to be interpreted in accordance with the changing time and conditions. Islamic religion puts forward general provisions which may lead to the development of science, and the elaboration of an atmosphere required for this development. The basic principle is that human beings should not put themselves into danger by their own hands. We are going to assess triage in terms of this principle.

It is possible to regard triage at first sight as a classification or categorization of human beings, or an application of a sort of passive euthanasia. However, this perception leads to the idea that certain fundamental principles which lay the foundations of bioethics are violated. For instance, it may be claimed that triage is not ethical due to such grounds as it violates the principle of Justice which entails that "the physicians should offer equal service to their patients and not regard another important than the other during treatment" and 2 basic principles of Geneva Convention, Immunity and Elimination of Discrimination, which is important in terms of right to medical service. However, when this issue is handled more closely, it is seen that these claims are not right. As mentioned above when explaining the notion of triage, triage is a process of medical decision-making and preference to provide more help to more patients or injured people. It is a sort of patient management, and it is the task of a physician.

As clearly seen, the starting point of triage is the principle of "beneficence" which is an ethical principle. The other important elements of triage are human beings (the injured or patients) and

physicians. What is the position of these 3 elements in Islam?¹⁶

Human beings and their fundamental rights hold an important place in Islam. Human beings are the highest ring of the chain of living creatures in the universe. Humans are the superior and most honorable creatures of Allah. They owe this superiority to their biological genesis as well as the talents they have in their inner world. This reality is mentioned as follows in Qur'an:

"Surely, We have created the man in the most noble mould" (Teen, 95:4) "We have honored the children of Adam." (Isra, 17:70) All living creatures except for human beings are at disposal. "He created for you all that there is on the earth." (Baqarah, 2:29) "Do you not see that Allah has made serviceable unto you whatsoever is in the skies and whatsoever is in the earth and has loaded you with his favours seen and unseen?" (Loqman, 31:20)

All these higher values are granted to them just because they are human beings. The most fundamental right of human beings is the right to live and it is superior to anything else. Everything which may violate the right to live is prohibited. This is highlighted as follows in Qur'an:

"Do not kill the soul whom Allah has forbidden except by right." (Isra, 17:33) "That was why We wrote that who ever killed a soul, except for a soul slain, or for sedition in the earth, it should be considered as though he had killed all mankind; and that who ever saved it should be regarded as though he had saved all mankind." (Ma'ida, 5:32)

Only these 2 ayas (verses) are sufficient to underline the value attached to human beings. Therefore, it is of great importance to provide the continuity of human life.

The Islamic Prophet Mohammed addresses the whole humanity in his famous speech known as Farewell Speech:

"O People, just as you regard this month, this day, this city as Sacred, so regard the life, property and honor of every Muslim as a sacred trust. They are protected against all violations".^{17,18}

The fact that the right to live is superior to all other rights hold a great importance in Islam as well as all other religions and legal regulations regarding the preservation of this right have been introduced. Islamic scholars declared that the preservation of right to live as well as mind, property, religion and generation of human beings was obligatory in order to protect the honor of human and that this was the liability of the State. Islamic philosophy advises that human beings, as social creatures, have to regard the importance of beneficence in their interpersonal relations in order to maintain their existence in the society:

"And cooperate in righteousness and warding off (evil), and do not cooperate in sinfulness and transgression". (Ma'ida 5:2)

Hazrat Mohammed said the following: "The most auspicious of you is the one who is more beneficial to the humanity; and the most evil is the one who is harmful."¹⁹

"Anyone who calls others to goodness acquires as much merit in God's sight as the ones who follow him. God's mercy on people who follow him does not decline. Anyone who calls others to evil acquires as many sins as the ones who follow him. The sins of the ones who follow him does not decline".¹⁸

"As human beings help their Muslim brothers, Allah will help those human beings". "Whoever sees an evil should attempt to change it with its hands. If he fails to change with his hands, let him change it with his tongue. If he fails to change with his tongue, let him tend to change it with his heart".¹⁸

It is seen that Islam attaches great importance to the principle of "beneficence" which constitutes one of the most significant subject matters of philosophy of ethics and is regarded as the basic principle of medical ethics, and recognizes that beneficence is one of the most important elements of social life. Islam fosters and encourages not only the principle of "beneficence" but also all ethical principles which are based on the rights and honor of human beings and protect and progress them in conformity with the changing conditions.

As evidenced by the explanations above, human beings are superior creatures; all their rights are sacred and immune, and all remedies in order to protect these rights should be searched. Since triage is an application which aims to protect the right to live of human beings, the attitude of Islam towards triage is positive. However, the problem is that physicians who are responsible for the application of triage have to act in conformity with ethical norms. Triage is under the responsibility of merely physicians. It is really "a grave and worrying selection process for the physician".²⁰

In medical literature exist many detections concerning the qualities that any physician to carry out triage should possess. One of these detections is that "among the basic principles that physicians are expected to implement is respect to traditions and beliefs of the injured and patients". The qualifications of physicians to carry out triage is parallel to those of "Veteran Physician" mentioned by Islam scholars.²¹

Furthermore, certain rules, included in the principles known as "General Principles" in the Islamic literature and determined by Islam scholars

taking account of the Koran and the practices of Mohammed, point out that triage is not an application against Islamic religion. "*Necessities allow prohibitions.*"²²

Necessity is an excuse which requires the practice of a prohibited act. Allowance of any act is determined by lawmakers. In the methodology of Islamic law, allowing the practice of an act which has been prohibited is referred to as giving license/permission.

Abu Ishaq as-Shatibi, explains the principle "Necessities allow prohibitions" as follows: "Necessities require license/permission"; the objective of license is not only to relieve from sins any person who has been obliged to carry out an illicit act but also to abolish the illicitness of that illicit act. At the core of this conception lies the abatement of the committer".²³

"When you are obliged to do any of 2 evils, choose the one whose harm is less severe".²⁴

According to this principle, when 2 harms exist simultaneously, the one which is more grave should be avoided. "*Avoid the more harmful of two evil acts.*"²² The less harmful of 2 evil acts should be preferred. Here the person is bound to determine the less harmful of 2 evils. Personal preferences are under the conscientious responsibility of humans. However, objective criteria should be determined for the matters which concern the public.

Consequently, triage is not a method which involve killing someone intentionally or leaving anybody to death or ignoring human beings, but an application which intends to provide help to as many persons as possible. When triage is carried out by an experienced physician taking account of medical and ethical principles, it is certainly not a practice against medicine and ethics, and it is an acceptable, useful and necessary application in terms of Islamic thought as well.

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