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# Using the Rashomon Effect as a Tool To Work Through Moral Distress

Bethesda, MD — Applying the Rashomon effect to frame understanding of an ethically complex case can help Psychosomatic Medicine physicians and other clinicians work through their experiences of moral distress and potentially prevent clinical dilemmas from haunting them in the future. The Rashomon effect is named after the classic 1950 movie, *Rashomon*, which told the story of a violent crime from the perspective of four different characters. The Rashomon effect occurs when different observers perceive the truth of an event in different, often conflicting, ways.

“All clinicians have cases that haunt us,” said Caridad Ponce Martinez, M.D., co-author of “Cases That Haunt Us: The Rashomon Effect and Moral Distress on the Consult Service,” published in a recent issue of *Psychosomatics*, the Journal of the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine. Most often, the article noted, this distress is caused when clinicians feel they are violating their sense of professional or personal integrity. “Because of the role that psychiatrists are placed in—caring for some of the most vulnerable members of society—Psychiatric Consultants are susceptible to moral distress because of the limitations associated with our role as consultants,” she added.

The article presented a clinically complex case of a middle-aged man with failure to thrive due largely to poor nutritional intake, severe depression, and an overall poor quality of life, but lacking a terminal condition, where the treatment teams involved in his care struggled to reach a consensus regarding his refusal of treatment and all experienced moral distress. The article pointed out that legally and ethically, adults with decisional capacity may refuse medical interventions, including life-sustaining treatments, and under certain circumstances, they may also voluntarily stop eating and drinking without interference from health care professionals.

When these decisions are informed and voluntary, clinicians generally have an ethical obligation to honor them even if they disagree, based on a patient’s right to autonomy and self-determination. “However, when a mental illness plays a role, as it was in this case, it is widely accepted that honoring choices that result in a hastened death ethically may be delayed to assess a patient’s decision-making capacity, detect a mental illness that might be contributing, and attempt to treat the mental illness with the goal of relieving the suffering that might be contributing to the decision,” said Dr. Ponce Martinez. In this complex case study, the treatment teams disagreed over the degree of capacity this patient had to appreciate the possibility of benefit from the various treatment options presented to him and therefore whether he ought to be allowed to refuse treatment. They also disagreed in what they saw as ethically acceptable and unacceptable ways forward.

“In our case, moral distress for everyone was heightened as different parties truly found their professional ethical commitments challenged by the different truths being seen, each of which supported different treatment options,” said Dr. Ponce Martinez. “Using the Rashomon effect in real time would have helped those involved to empathetically understand the ethical perspectives of different treatment team members, which could have decreased the moral distress for all involved.”

While the use of reframing to work through distressing events is not a new concept in psychiatry, the authors hope that introducing the concepts of moral distress and the Rashomon effect into the Psychosomatic Medicine community provides a novel and useful framing device to think through ethically challenging cases, with the ultimate hope of reducing the number that go on to haunt psychiatrists in the future.

The Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, a professional society of more than 1,200 leading physicians, represents psychiatrists dedicated to the advancement of medical science, education, and health care for persons with co-morbid psychiatric and general medical conditions.

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