Reviewer's report

Title: In-Hospital Emergency Department Triage: an Ethical Analysis

Version: 1 Date: 11 February 2011

Reviewer: Lisa Anderson-Shaw

Reviewer's report:

1. Does the debate present a novel argument, or a novel insight into existing work?

The concept of triage has been around for many years, with ethical analysis included in the recent past and present literature.

I was not convinced that this article was analyzing emergency department triage, in general, or disaster emergency triage. Much of the article was focused on what appeared to be large scale disaster situations rather than the typical busy ED day to day operations. Much was discussed regarding the use of "scarce resources" but day to day operations are not so much an overuse of scarce resources as it is the inappropriate use of medical resources.

2. Does the debate address an important problem of interest to a broad biomedical audience?

This topic has appeal to a broad biomedical audience as most practitioners in the acute care setting interact with the ED with some frequency. The concept of a fair and ethical triage framework has merit, however, perhaps a bit more discussion on the topic of ED triage rather than disaster triage would be in order (unless the authors mean the text to address disaster triage?) This was not clear.

3. Is the piece well argued and referenced?

The piece concentrated heavily on the principles of ethics (Beauchamp & Childress). Principles are usually a wonderful place to begin an ethical analysis, but often leave one short when really trying to provide in-depth analysis and framework development. Near the end of the article, the authors speak to the "caring response", which I found very interesting, but again, left the analysis short.

On page 12 under 'Implications the authors list steps for a "care-oriented approach" and what is listed was not previously described nor discussed in the text. Where did these statements come from? I would have been very interested in the discussion within the text that produced the approach statements listed.

4. Has the author used logical arguments and sound reasoning?

Specific text comments:
p. 2: Perhaps a paragraph or two discussing the misuse of ED services for routine care that should be rendered in a physician’s office might be useful in this section. There are numerous articles and research on this topic.

p. 3: The second full paragraph was a bit awkward and not clear as to intent and meaning. The ED usually is not hard pressed for "scarce" resources unless pressed with large numbers of patients such as with a disaster situation. Please clarify this.

p. 3: There are references that the authors may not be aware of, such as:


More research is needed as to the use of ethics consultation (proactive) in the ED and perhaps a mention of this would be useful.

p. 6: I think the concept of autonomy, especially in ED situations, is very difficult to assess, especially when urgent situations arise, as often is the case. Perhaps speak to this issue a bit more, that autonomy is not impeded but maybe implied in many ED situations.

p. 7: The last paragraph mentions the U.S. health system.."emergency services are the only health care services provided irrespective of the ability to pay(7) and can thus be regarded as a safety net.". This was not clear to me what was meant by 'safety net'. There are situations where care is not rendered in the ED situation and is deflected to a 'fast tract' clinic within the institution. Please clarify meaning.

p. 11: The institutional framework is interesting, but not enough was said on this. It might be that there are 2 separate papers in this one paper - one that looks at the philosophy / contextual features of ethical ED triage, and another one that speaks to policy issues once a just ED triage system is in place. Please clarify.

On page 12 under 'Implications" the authors list steps for a "care-oriented approach" and what is listed was not previously described nor discussed in the text. Where did these statements come from? I would have been very interested in the discussion within the text that produced the approach statements listed.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable
**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.