Reviewer's report

Title: The four principles: Can they be measured and do they predict ethical decision making?

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Reviewer: Andrew Edgar

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Review of 'The four principles: Can they be measured and do they predict ethical decision making?'

BMC Medical Ethics

This is an interesting and highly worthwhile study. It takes the principalist approach to moral decision-making, and treats it as an empirical problem, in determining how the principles are applied and crucially prioritised.

To the best of my knowledge, the research and statistical methods used are appropriate and rigorous (although I'm not a statistician). The data are clearly presented, and the support the results as they stand.

My only reservation concerns the understanding of principlism, and thus moral decision-making, that underpins the research. The general assumption seems to be that the principles are a set of relatively abstract rules that can be applied to a moral dilemma. The core problem then posed that of conflicts between principles, and such conflicts are resolved by prioritising principles (so that one ultimately trumps others). This is a wide-spread understanding of principlism, albeit one that I fear is now somewhat outdated (and not obviously supported, for example, by the latest edition of Beauchamp and Childress). The author does take some account of alternative accounts of moral decision-making, and indeed of principlism (for example in the concluding remarks of section 3). Most importantly this is taken up in the conclusion (section 6), not least in response to Landua and Osmo. However, the possibility of casuistry is dismissed rather quickly (see perhaps John D. Arras, ‘Getting Down to Cases: The Revival of Casuistry in Bioethics’, Journal of Medicine and Philosophy (1991) 16 (1): 29-51), and the possibilities of more sophisticated interpretations of principlism, that strive to embrace the contextual nature of moral decision-making (and avoid the danger of reducing principlism to a mere moral algorithm) are not really addressed. These positions may have significance in interpreting the results. Could I suggest looking at Simon Waltho, ‘Response to Westin and Nilstun’, Health Care Analysis, Volume 14, Number 2, 2006, 119-122 (and if possible, Waltho’s doctoral dissertation submitted to Cardiff University).

The author may regard these comments as irrelevant to the particular type of principlism being addressed here, but I do suggest that a more sophisticated
conception of moral decision-making may influence the interpretation of the data, and make the paper of broader relevance.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

No competing interests