‘Shared decision making’ is held up as an ideal decision-making standard

1. This position espouses a balance of maximal respect for patient-autonomy
2. This position recognises the technical expertise of the clinician

But ...

It is used too often to describe (and justify) decision-making practices that are not shared at all. This is problematic because if the legitimacy of a decision relies on it being ‘shared’, but it is not in fact shared, the decision loses legitimacy, or is falsely legitimised by the appearance of being shared.

This leads us onto the horns of a dilemma

1. We must either accept that the majority of decisions made in clinical practice fall below the required standard and are unethical as a result
2. We must acknowledge there is a problem with the current standard of shared decision making.

And a third horn?

1. To say that shared decision making is not just not always attainable, it may not always be required. The level of collaboration required for genuinely shared decision making is only ethically required when substantively important decisions are being made. We then consider whether, nonetheless, the language of shared decision is a useful shorthand that, whilst not always accurate, may be legitimately used to cover a range of decision making practices and processes, a ‘noble lie’.

Some readings:

- Boyd K. The impossibility of informed consent? J Med Ethics 2015; 41: 44-7
- Neighbour R, Chapter B5, Checkpoint 3 (handover): communication skills, in The Inner Consultation (2nd Edition), Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford 2004

Reflection – why do you agree or disagree? Talk to us, we would love to know what you think!

Simple agreement is very often good enough, and the level of collaboration required for genuinely shared decision making is only ethically required when substantively important decisions are being made.

We argue for more honesty about when shared decision is genuine and when it is not, but make a case for beneficent, honest and reflective agreement possibly being good enough.

Note: this poster represents the authors’ discussion and is not representative of the position of any one author or of their employing organisations.