

Dialogue 5

Is it Ethical to Choose for Patients? “Nudges” in Research and Practice

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Behavioral economics has shown that “nudges” – i.e. non-rational influences on decisions – can be used to affect individuals’ choices in ways that might be good for them. Some experts have argued for using such nudges in medicine, and a good deal of research in this area is under way. At the same time, the use of nudges has been attacked as paternalistic and failing to respect patient autonomy. Some of the concern stems from the fact that non-rational factors are being used to encourage decisions that might have poor outcomes for at least some individuals. These dangers are described during this analysis of the ethics of using nudges in research and clinical practice.

Dr. Schwartz is a Faculty Investigator at the Indiana University Center for Bioethics, with appointments in both the Department of Medicine and Department of Philosophy. He received his M.D. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania and completed his residency in internal medicine at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital. His research focuses on ethical and policy issues related to risk, prevention and decision-making in medicine. He also conducts empirical research on patient decisions regarding colon cancer screening and the impact of “personalized” information in this area.

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