

Doing Bioethics through Film

A Film By MIKE NICHOLS

Wit

It appears to be a matter of life and death.

WIT

- Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning play (1999) by Margaret Edson.
- Director- Mike Nichols.
- Produced by: Simon Bosanquet.
- Main Actress: Emma Thompson (Vivian Bearing) has won numerous awards for her acting and writing amongst which an academy award, Golden globe, and a WGA Screen award.
- Other actors: Christopher Lloyd, Eileen Atkins, Audra McDonald, Jonathan M. Woodward, Harold Pinter.

WIT

- This HBO (Home Box Office 2001) movie is based on Margaret Edson's (1995) Pulitzer Prize-winning play featuring the plight of Vivian Bearing a university literature professor who has stage iv ovarian cancer.
- In the film we will see: her suffering, her relationship with her two doctors, Dr. Harvey Kelekian, her oncologist and Jason Posner a resident and fellow studying with Dr. Kelekian, her loss of dignity and finally her death.

- The story is narrated by the protagonist herself, Vivian Bearing in an almost ironic way.
- We see flashbacks from her own schooling days, her teaching days and episodes throughout her illness.
- WIT is set in a major university hospital where we can clearly see that it has multiple missions:
 - A: Administration of medical treatment to patients.
 - B: Conducts specialised medical research.
 - C: Trains interns & residents.
- The film is often shown at medical colleges as an example of how doctors, researchers and other Health Professionals should NOT behave.

Diagnosis

- Profs. Bearing is informed of her diagnosis, though we can see that nothing is mentioned regarding her prognosis.
- Christakis (1999) stated that many physicians avoid giving prognosis for multiple reasons.

A: It is a good reason on how to negotiate conflicts between the obligations of maintaining hope and of being honest.

B: Giving prognosis might be regarded as arrogant and pretentious.

- Dr. Kelekian recommends “an experimental combination of drugs” describing it as “the most effective treatment modality” available. Later he says that “this treatment is the strongest thing we have to offer you. AND as Research, it will make a significant contribution to our knowledge.”
- Immediately Vivian Bearing is both a **Patient** and a **Research Subject**.
- He discusses some of the likely side effects and gives her the informed consent document. She reads it lightly and signs it!
- As we see in the film she later comes to regret this action by saying “I should have asked more questions”

Film: Diagnosis.

Investigations

- Here we can see Ms. Bearing going through a number of investigations.
- Notice the insensitivity of Professional Health Care workers towards the patient!!!
- These problems are made worse when Vivian encounters Dr. Jason Posner, (Dr. Kelekian's resident) because of a prior relationship with Jason a former student of hers.
- In the past relationship she had the power; now Jason does.

- We will see Jason conducting a medical history. Vivian tries to explain that this has already been done but he insists that it needs to be done.
- We see that the whole interview is quite awkward due part to their past relationship and to Jason's inexperience.
- We also see his insensitivity when before the physical examination he remembers that a woman must be present.
- He leaves Vivian in an uncomfortable position on the stirrups and describes the necessity of having another woman in the room as "some crazy clinical rule".
- His Insensitivity is at its best when he feels the large mass and shouts "JESUS" something a patient certainly does not want to hear.

Film: A doctor of Philosophy.

Grand Rounds

- Grand round consists of a visit by Dr Kelekian and his team of residents.
- Here we see Vivian touched, poked and discussed in the third person as if she is not present.
- She comments” They read me like a book. Once I did the teaching; now I am Thought.
- Vivian seems to accept that training medical students and residents is justified even though it results in a bad experience for patients.
- Dr Kelekian insists on continuing the treatment/research at full dose.
- Film: Grand Rounds.

Research vs Treatment

- We do not know what type of research protocol this is. Vivian is directly assigned to receive the experimental drugs so it is not a randomised clinical trial.
- It does not seem to be a phase one trial as this is done to determine if and at what point, the experimental drug/treatment is harmful to people.
- This is probably a phase two trial, carried out on a number of patients to see if any benefits are seen. If there is no other known treatment available this might be accepted but to call it 'treatment' is misleading.
- Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Posner are totally focused on their research blinding them from their therapeutic obligations towards Vivian such as hospice care.
- Both doctors are seen to push patient beyond her limits: 8 doses of Hex-amethophosphacil and Vinplatin and at full dose.

Research vs Treatment

- The experimental phase has got to have the maximum dose to be of any use. We hear Jason say that Dr. Kelekian did not think it was possible and he wished that all get through them, stating that “then we will have some data”.
- Merritt (2005) mentioned ‘a protective duty’ and a general moral obligation to protect subjects well-being in the face of risks incurred by participating in research. When researchers are also physicians, they have an additional role-related obligation not to imperil the health of anyone.
- This is seen in our next scene when we see Ms. Bearing arriving in hospital one night with severe distress and when the nurse suggests the lowering of the next dose due to her condition, Jason answers “Lower the dose? No Way. Full dose. She’ tough.”

Research vs Treatment

- The focus here again is that the drug regimen is helping Vivian; rather it is that they need more data.
- We will also see Susie (The Nurse) telling Vivian that she must go to the laboratory for an ultrasound. “ They’re concerned about a bowel obstruction” She refuses but when the nurse persists she accepts.
- The question here is whether the test would have been ordered if Vivian was not a research subject.
- We hear Vivian describe herself as just a specimen jar!
- Film Isolation.

Therapeutic Misconception

- Here we see Susie the nurse do two things we would expect her doctors to do.
- 1: Being truthful about the ‘treatment’s’ lack of success. Vivian here asks “ My cancer is not being cured is it?” On confirmation she continues “ They never expected it to be did they?”
- Susie acknowledges but confirms that they have learned a lot for their research but “there isn’t a good treatment for what you have yet. They should have explained this”.
- This indicates that her consent was not informed and that they made her believe that the treatment was more curative than it truly was.
- Susie here conveys to Vivian that her death is imminent, the first time in the film that the patient’s prognosis is addressed.

Therapeutic Misconception

- 2: Susie Also raises the question about 'code status' Full code or (DNR) do not resuscitate.
- Susie explains that the doctors might have a different view about this issue because sustaining her life a bit longer may provide more useful data.
- Vivian agrees to the latter, this is conveyed to Dr. Kelekian and a DNR order is written.
- After this conversation Vivian is relieved that at last she has received some kindness. Something that as a research subject, she has certainly not received.
- Film Popsicles

Ending

- Vivian's last dying moments do not pass as they should have.
- We see Jason entering Vivian's room, noting that she is unresponsive, he checks her vital signs and detecting no pulse calls a code.
- Susie enters and shouts "she is DNR" he replies "she's research"
- CPR team arrives and starts resuscitation, Susie tries to stop them while Jason realises his mistake after seeing her chart and yells that he made a mistake.

Ending

- CPR team members checks situation and stops CPR once they confirm that patient was DNR.
- They express their disapproval at the doctor “ It’s a doctor screw-up, What is he?”
- Vivian’s last minutes as a patient are not easy. She is subjected to an unnecessary code. Did she suffer at that time? Who Knows.
- Why did this happen?
- When Jason said “ She’s research!” the implication could be that he wanted to extend her life to have further data.
- It could also be due to Jason’s inexperience or incompetence.

Conclusion

- The film shows that special moral problems can arise when physicians recruit their own patients as research subjects due to the fact that a possibility of coercion and exploitation seem especially great when using their own patients.
- The film clearly shows that a hospital's provision of patient care can be compromised by its commitment to teaching and research.
- It does not give a clear message if any of these missions should be abandoned.
- Film: Death.