**Book Review**

**TITLE: Survivors’ guide to research ethics**

**AUTHOR: Vijayaprasad Gopichandran**

Book Title: Core ethics for health professionals: principles, issues, and compliance

Author: Robert F Phalen

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**Complexity of ethics versus simplicity of presentation: a delicate balance**

Taking a clue from the author, I ventured into searching the Amazon website for the number of books written on ethics. To my amazement, I found more than 200,000 and out of this about 2000 were books on health care ethics. Robert Phalen has added to this list an interesting book on ethics in health care. The book is a “survivor’s guide” to research ethics, written as crisp, concise notes on various aspects of the topic, in a manner that is easy to understand and internalize. The book caters largely to an American readership with examples and anecdotes from the American research context. It stands by as a good handbook for ethics courses that are mandated for holding research grants from the National Institute of Health in the United States.

The first look at the way the chapters are organized made me feel that this book is like any other one on health care ethics. But I realized as I read along that some of the chapters are different and unique. The book begins with a narration of prominent scandals in medical research such as the Nazi prisoner experiments and the Tuskegee Syphilis trials. Using the presentation of these scandals the author lays a foundation for the philosophy of research ethics. The book then moves on to regulations and guidelines. Some of the unique chapters in this book are the chapter on crimes against science, the one on public perceptions and trust in research, and the last two chapters on new and emerging advances in health care and its associated ethical dilemmas. The chapter on public perceptions and trust in research highlights the importance of trustworthiness of health care research as an ethical imperative. The final chapter is the ‘survival guide’ which gives practical tips to medical researchers to steer clear of ethical misconduct.

Coming from a medical background, I have always found it difficult to engage with scholarly literature on philosophy of health care and health care ethics. Most of this difficulty arose because of the difference between a strongly fact-based, empirical type of knowledge that is inherent in medical science as against the theoretical strengths of philosophical literature. Phalen’s book makes health care ethics digestible to the medical reader. It breaks down complex philosophical theories into bite sized chunks of reading material, without losing the actual meaning of the philosophy behind it. The book has a smooth and easy flow and one can easily read the whole book in one go.

Though the book does serve the purpose of being a beginner’s manual and a survivor’s guide, it reduces certain complex issues in health care ethics into simplified check-lists, which stands the risk of over simplification of certain concepts. For example, by presenting the ethical issues related to end of life in just over 250 words, the actual complexity of the issue is diluted. The issue here is not just that of the word count, but also the depth and breadth of coverage of the topic. The balance between keeping the book concise and easy to use for a beginner and presenting important ethics issues without losing the complexity is very fine. This is something that the author could have paid attention to. In some places, especially the chapters on “Regulation, Guidelines and Policies”, “Compliance and Online Training” and “A better future (A survival guide)”, the author sounds like he is prescribing certain behaviours to the readers. Such a prescriptive approach may again restrict the capacity to engage in ethical reasoning and debate. However, to compensate for this, the author has provided questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter.

The book will be very useful for a student of research ethics, a PhD scholar in health care, a post doctoral researcher, a young and mid-career researcher and anybody involved in research ethics or health care research in the United States. However, its applicability for researchers from a global context is questionable. For example, the Indian research environment is very different from the one that is presented in this book, making it a bit difficult for an Indian reader to directly apply the concepts presented into their settings. However, the book does provide useful insights to an international reader on the research ethics regulations, guidelines and policies in the United States. Robert Phalen should consider expanding his book to a more global readership, elaborating some key ethical issues and bringing the much needed balance between the complexity of research ethics and simplicity of presentation. The book in its current form is a useful addition as a beginner’s manual on research ethics in the US context.