

Ethical and Legal Challenges in Acute Paediatric Care: Reflections from a Medical Elective in Australia.

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Keywords

Medical Elective | Ethical | Legal | Paediatrics | Australia

Abbreviations

WA - Western Australia

CSA - Child Sexual Abuse

ITO - Inpatient Treatment Order

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Abstract: This article reflects on an elective placement undertaken by a fourth-year student doctor. It uses an anonymised case study to explore the ethical and legal complexities of treating children in an emergency setting. The article aims to highlight the value of overseas electives for personal and professional development.

Reflection on my Elective

The Elective

My four-week elective was based in a paediatric emergency department in Western Australia (WA). I attended teaching sessions with other student doctors, clerked patients, and participated in on-call shifts throughout the department, including in resuscitation bays.

Elective Objectives

The main objectives for my elective were:

- Explore ethical and legal issues in emergency care
- Develop my confidence in emergency patient assessment
- Compare the healthcare systems of the United Kingdom and Australia

Reflection

My case study involves a patient brought in by police after being found unconscious at an older male's house. The patient was suicidal and reported that the man had drugged and sexually assaulted them. They were unaccompanied by a parent and had a background of neurodiversity. They declined further police involvement and hospital admission. However, the doctors formally reported the suspected child sexual abuse (CSA) in line with Mandatory Reporting and admitted them to psychiatry under an Inpatient Treatment Order (ITO).

Mandatory Reporting is a legal requirement for doctors in WA to report suspected CSA to the Department of Communities, overriding confidentiality (Government of WA, 2025). An ITO enables involuntary hospital admission under the Mental Health Act 2014 (Government of WA, 2014). Both legislations aim to protect vulnerable patients.

The case was more complex than those I had previously encountered, and I felt anxious approaching it. I was concerned that my presence, in addition to the doctors, may overwhelm the patient. Finally, it was upsetting to witness the doctors acting against the patient's wishes.

Ethical challenges can be explored using the Four Principles of Medical Ethics: autonomy, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence (Shea, 2020). Here, the doctors overrode the patient's autonomy. This promoted non-

maleficence by preventing unsafe discharge, beneficence through psychiatric care, and justice by enabling investigation of a potential crime. These actions are supported by a scoping review reporting improved outcomes with ITOs (Corderoy *et al.*, 2025), and an observational study showing a two-fold increase in correctly identified CSA cases across WA after Mandatory Reporting was introduced (Matthews, Lee and Normal, 2016).

Overall, the doctors acted in the patient's best interests. However, this does not negate the impacts of restricting autonomy. This patient described feeling "like a crazy person" and "a prisoner," consistent with evidence from a meta-synthesis showing that many patients under ITOs feel criminalised (Goulet *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore crucial to acknowledge these experiences and explain rationale behind restrictive measures.

My wider reading and discussions with doctors helped me understand the necessity of their actions and I now feel more comfortable with them. I also felt my presence as a female medical student may have helped calm the patient, given my less authoritative role.

Conclusion

I believe I met my original objectives, and I will build on these during my upcoming eight-week GP placement, broadening the scope to adults and the community setting. Specifically, I will discuss a safeguarding case with my supervisor and write a reflection on it using Gibb's Reflective Cycle

(Dhollande, Shepherd and Barnard, 2025).

This elective enhanced my clinical skills and confidence, and the experience will support my ambition to become a paediatrician in the future.

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