Ancient Greek physician/philosopher entreats doctors to "first, do no harm."

Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle defines justice as "treating equals equally and unequals differently." Concept of justice as fairness takes hold.

Jewish Rabbi, philosopher, and physician Maimonides perpetuated the ancient Greek medical art and philosophy that bridge ancient and modern medical science and ethics.

European rebirth of ancient Greek and Roman culture. Hippocratic and Aristotelian notions of medical art, science, philosophy, and ethics are revived and flourish.

European enlightenment thinkers shape age-old moral philosophies to align with modern cosmologies based on reason and science. Autonomy gains new prominence in moral and political philosophy as well as in Percival's medical ethics.

1914 case of Schloendorff v. Society of New York Hospital makes ethical precept of "informed consent" a legal rule of law. Unfortunately, informed consent remains largely ignored for the next 50 years.

Nazi research on humans (mostly concentration camp prisoners) appalls the world. U.S. leads the prosecution, despite harboring much unethical research like the Tuskegee syphilis study during this same time.


After congressional hearings prompted by Beecher article and exposé of Tuskegee study, ethicists, lawyers and doctors write the Belmont Report, which argues that medical research must conform to ethical principles of Beneficence (which subsumed nonmaleficence), Respect for Persons, and Justice.

Since the late 1970s, the legal and ethical environment in which the health care profession is practiced has changed radically. Laws and regulations brought about by the Belmont Report's principles of ethics touch every aspect of medicine. Accreditation agencies and professional ethics codes all incorporate some version of the 4 principles of health care ethics. Institutional ethics committees, ethics consultants, and policies like informed consent and patient bills of rights have become commonplace, though political and economic realities continue to make the ethical management of health care a difficult proposition.

The bumpy road of the ethical principles of health care.