

## Case Studies/Activities

### Chapter 1: Values and ethics

#### Commentary 1 - by Julian Bell

Obviously, this case might be discussed from an 'ethics of justice' perspective by applying relevant ethical principles. Indeed, the commentary provided in Banks and Nohr's book focuses primarily on the ethical principle of self-determination. Does the man, despite his mental state, retain the competence to make an informed choice about this sort of matter? If he does have a right to self-determination with respect to this matter, does this over-ride other ethical considerations, including the strong objections of his wife?

While not ignoring issues concerning individual autonomy, an 'ethics of care' approach would give particular attention to the feelings of those involved. What feelings – subjective hurts – might the man experience if his desire to eat meat, which others are evidently enjoying, is denied? How might this situation impact on staff and other residents and their relationships? (Other residents might view the staff as cruel in denying the man the opportunity to eat what he wants and also wonder whether their own wishes might be similarly thwarted in future.)

However, an empathic and compassionate response would also require careful consideration be given to the wife's views and feelings. A shared commitment to veganism may have been a strong bond and a key part of their identity as a couple. The experience of choosing, buying, cooking and eating vegan food may have been a core element of their married life. Furthermore, their belief in veganism may have formed part of a wider – possibly political, ethical and spiritual – system of ideas. If her husband is allowed to eat meat, she may feel that their marriage has been invalidated, that she is 'losing' the husband that she has loved for many years. The emotional impact of this needs to be fully recognised. So, should a decision be made to allow her husband to eat meat, it will be important to provide necessary support and counselling for her. This might aim to encourage her to come to accept these developments in her husband's personality, beliefs and desires and to maintain a loving relationship with her husband despite these very significant changes.

This case illustrates, though, that deciding on the most compassionate and caring response to any situation can be challenging. The 'ethics of care' has shown too that that caring in human relationships can be expressed in a variety of very different ways. (Consider, for example, how caring may be manifested in a close friendship compared to a parent–child or a nurse–patient relationship.) It has also raised issues concerning the status and value attached to many forms of caring in contemporary society, as well as highlighting the fact that women generally are expected to take on a greater burden of practical caring tasks (with the 'caring professions' - whose members are predominantly female – typically having relatively lower status and remuneration). Furthermore, despite placing care and caring at the forefront of morality, some proponents of the 'ethic of care' have noted too the real danger of caring becoming paternalistic and oppressive in some instances. The vulnerability of those heavily dependent on care from others – particularly care relating to basic physical and emotional needs – has to be acknowledged. Of course, social workers – who often take on legal and moral responsibilities with regard to the protection of children and vulnerable adults – are well aware of this. Unfortunately, on occasion, we may require protection from our supposed carers.