



I K I R U

Medical Ethics in Ikiru

The Burden of Truth & The Imperative Right to Know

By: Aditya Pola

Ikiru — To Live

What does it mean to truly live when facing death?

Directed by Akira Kurosawa (1952)

- **Kanji Watanabe** is a lifelong bureaucrat who feels his life has lacked meaning
- Learns he has **terminal stomach cancer**, though doctors initially hide the truth
- Confronting death, he dedicates his remaining time to **building a playground** for the community



The Dilemma

Should doctors tell the truth, even when it causes harm?



The Physicians' Perspective

- Terminal diagnosis with very little time remaining
- Past experience shows patients often react with fear and despair
- Belief that withholding the truth protects emotional well-being

Kanji Watanabe's Perspective

- Patients have a right to know their own condition
- Knowledge allows people to make meaningful choices about life
- The burden of confronting death belongs to the patient

Stakeholders

Those affected by the dilemma

Kanji Watanabe

- The patient whose diagnosis is withheld and whose life decisions depend on the truth

Physicians

- Responsible for balancing honesty, patient welfare, and professional duties

Watanabe's Family

- Indirectly affected by how he chooses to spend his remaining life

Other Patients

- Medical practices surrounding truth-telling affect expectations of care

Society / Medical Profession

- Ethical norms surrounding disclosure shape trust in healthcare systems





"How tragic that man can never realize how beautiful life is until he is face to face with death."

My Stance

I side with Watanabe: The burden of truth is worth bearing.

- Knowledge of mortality can transform how we live
- Without the truth, Watanabe would never have found purpose in his final months
- Watching his growth in the film shows that truth can create meaning, not just suffering



Ethical Theories

How different moral frameworks interpret the dilemma



Utilitarianism

Is deception justified if it reduces overall suffering?

- Focus on maximizing overall happiness and minimizing suffering
- Doctors hide the diagnosis to prevent psychological distress
- From a utilitarian view, deception may seem justified in the short term
- The film shows the opposite: knowing the truth ultimately gives Watanabe purpose



Deontology

Do doctors have a duty to tell the truth?

-
- Morality based on duties and moral rules, not consequences
 - Physicians may believe protecting the patient fulfills their duty to prevent harm
 - However, doctors also have a duty to be honest and respect autonomy
 - The dilemma reveals a conflict between competing medical duties

- Moral principles arise from human nature and rationality
- Doctors hide the diagnosis to protect Watanabe's emotional state
- But natural law values rational self-determination
- Learning the truth allows Watanabe to act meaningfully with the time he has left



Natural Law
Humans must be free to reason about their own lives



Ethical Principles

Core principles guiding medical decision-making



Autonomy

Patients have the right to know and decide for themselves

- Autonomy requires truthful information and informed consent
- Doctors hide Watanabe's cancer diagnosis
- This removes his ability to choose how to live his remaining time
- Once he learns the truth, he finally acts with purpose and agency

Beneficence

Physicians must act to promote the patient's wellbeing

- Doctors believe withholding the diagnosis protects Watanabe emotionally
- Their intention is to reduce fear and psychological distress
- However, concealment leaves him confused and isolated
- True well-being may require honesty rather than protection



Non-Maleficence

Doctors must avoid causing harm

- Doctors try to prevent emotional harm from devastating news
- However harm can be psychological and moral, not just physical
- Deception delays Watanabe's confrontation with mortality
- The lie may cause lost time and broken trust





Justice

Patients deserve fair and ethical treatment

-
- Justice concerns fairness and equal treatment in healthcare
 - Paternalistic medicine often withheld diagnoses from patients
 - This denies patients equal access to truthful information
 - Raises concerns about systemic respect for patient dignity

A black and white photograph of a person wearing a hat, sitting inside a train car. The person is seen through a window that has a grid-like pattern, possibly from the window frame or a screen. The scene is dimly lit, with some light coming from the window, creating a somber and contemplative mood. The person is looking out of the window, and their reflection is visible on the glass.

Ethical Concepts

How moral reasoning shapes the dilemma



Consequentialism

Are actions right or wrong based on their outcomes?

- Moral value determined by the results of an action
- Doctors hide the diagnosis to prevent emotional suffering
- From their perspective, deception leads to a better overall outcome
- The film suggests the opposite: truth ultimately gives Watanabe purpose

Non-Consequentialism

Some actions are wrong regardless of their consequences

- Morality based on rules, duties, and respect for persons
- Lying to patients violates the duty of honesty
- Concealment prevents informed decision-making
- Watanabe's transformation shows the importance of respecting the right to know



Virtue

What does this decision say about moral character?

- Focuses on the character of the decision-maker
- Doctors may believe they act with compassion and mercy
- But honesty, wisdom, and justice are also key virtues
- Raises the question: does protecting Watanabe reflect wisdom or paternalism?





Reflection

- The film shows that knowledge of death can give life meaning, not just suffering
- Watching Watanabe transform made it clear that people deserve the chance to confront reality and decide how to live
- Withholding the truth may feel compassionate, but it can take away a person's dignity and agency
- This dilemma reminded me that ethical decisions in medicine affect not only health, but how people live their lives

Philosophical Contemplations

The moral tensions at the heart of the dilemma

- Does preventing suffering outweigh enabling meaningful action?
- Is non-maleficence always morally prior to beneficence? If not, when does that change?
- Does the knowledge of death give life greater meaning and urgency?
- Does truth have moral value independent of its consequences, and if so, should it be presented knowing it can cause suffering?
- If an action is likely to cause suffering for most people, does that create a moral duty to avoid it?

