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Guest Editorial

It is Time to Give Up on the AMA

When the state of New York passed a permissive abortion law in 1970, the AMA house of delegates was presented with a quandary. The organization had a century-old ethical policy condemning abortion, but now had members in good standing performing what were newly legal abortions in several states. The AMA reconciled the matter by passing a statement declaring that if you practiced in a state where abortion was *legal* it was ethical to perform it in that state. If you practiced in a state where abortion was against the law, it was *unethical* to perform abortion there. The AMA in attempting to finesse the issue in this coldly pragmatic fashion, made a crucial error. It tied the ethics of the learned profession of medicine to the laws of the state. In doing so, it replicated the fatal error demonstrated at the Nuremberg doctors' trials where the role of the medical profession in carrying out the exterminative policies of the Third Reich was exposed. This sordid tale has been further elucidated in Alan Jay Lifton's book, *The Nazi Doctors*.

Later on, when the Willowbrook experiments were exposed to the dismay of the international medical community, the AMA again assumed a strange position. The retarded children in Willowbrook had been deliberately infected with hepatitis virus with highly questionable standards for informed consent. The AMA, nonetheless, in its publications, took the position that the experiments were ethical because they were *successful* in producing immunity in the inoculated children. This put the nation's largest professional organization in conflict with

the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki on human experimentation.

During the Baby Doe controversy, the AMA's Judicial Counsel took the position that the decision of the parents of a handicapped child should always be accepted even if denial of surgery were not in the best interests of the newborn patient. In doing so, the AMA invited the membership to violate the law since there were virtually no legal authorities at the time who were claiming that parental decisions should always be honored whenever a surgical decision was being made on behalf of a minor child. In an era when all 50 states were passing child abuse statutes, the AMA was still proclaiming the ancient and obsolete Roman doctrine of "Pater Familias."

More recently, the same Judicial Counsel recommended that food and drink could be discontinued for those in persistent vegetative states. The AMA statement suggests that the diagnosis be "insured" and the coma irreversible "beyond doubt". These are degrees of certitude not achievable in the real world of bedside medicine. Persons in persistent vegetative states are neither dead nor dying. When feeding tubes are removed, they die of starvation and not of any underlying disease. Subsequently, AMA attorneys have intervened in cases throughout the country on behalf of starvation of patients, most recently in the *Longeway* case in Illinois. The AMA has shown no interest in the quandary created for attending physicians who were being directed by courts to remove feeding tubes against their strongly felt medical and conscientious positions to the contrary. In the *Jobes* case, the *Brophy* case, the *Conroy* case, and the *Bouvia* case, physicians and nursing personnel were being threatened by courts with punitive action if they did not discontinue feeding which they felt should be continued. Recently a judge in New York ruled that, if a hospital refused to deny a patient nutrition, the family should not be responsible for the patient's bills from that day forward.

The final affront to the tens of thousands of rank and file members who oppose abortion was the recent consideration of Resolution #49 by the 1989 Interim Meeting of the House of Delegates which reads "Resolved, that the American Medical Association support the position that no government nor governmental agency should be interposed between a patient and her physician with regard to the termination of pregnancy." This incredible statement recommends the *abolition of all abortion laws*. No attempt to protect the unborn child, the pregnant woman or even the abortionist should be "interposed". Such a resolution is the product of what we must sadly conclude is a morally bankrupt professional organization. After much debate, the following Pontius Pilate language was adopted "The early termination of pregnancy is a medical matter between the patient and physician subject to the physician's critical judgement, the patient's informed consent and the availability of appropriate facilities." In its final form the resolution takes no cognizance of the unique character of abortion as a killing operation and makes no

provision for its legal restriction or abolition.

Recently the executive secretary of the AMA, Dr. James Sammons, recipient of over \$600,000 per year in annual salary, resigned under pressure following the disclosure of highly questionable use of pension fund monies and participation in real estate deals involving the use of AMA funds to purchase homes and guarantee loans for various AMA staff members. In leaving office, Dr. Sammons pointed proudly to the fact that the organization had assets of \$25 million when he assumed office and \$193 million when he left office. This is the kind of boast one might expect from the CEO of General Motors, where profit and loss are the purpose of the franchise. The AMA is a *professional* organization, however. While its staff was accumulating capital (largely by increasing dues), the AMA was in decline as an influence in the community. Its prestige has never been lower. Constant and systematic intrusions of government into the practice of medicine have escalated in the past decade and the AMA's influence in lobbying against such intrusions has been totally ineffective and even ludicrous at times. The percentage of physicians in the United States who are members of the AMA is at its lowest point in history. The AMA journal, once one of the most influential medical publications in the world, has been exposed as having publication policies for the exclusion of papers on one side of controversial issues (such as abortion) and has published totally discredited studies on the epidemiology of the AIDS virus. The publication of the incredible article, "It's Over, Debbie", was the ultimate disgrace for a once proud journal. After publishing the account of the murder of a patient by a house officer, the editor claimed the freedom of the press privilege of concealing the identity of the author, thereby leaving him free to practice exterminative medicine at some other time and place.

For these and many other reasons, it is time for physicians of conscience to withdraw support from the American Medical Association. Those of us who have spent endless hours in organized medicine, holding offices and serving on committees at the local and state level, must now sadly conclude that the AMA is too corrupt to be reformed from within.

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