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## From the Editor's Desk

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## From the Editor's Desk



### *Our Hippocratic Tradition and Modern Medicine*

Medicine looks back to Hippocrates, who lived 2500 years ago, as its father. He laid down the ethic which we follow today, viz., we care, healers do no harm, be the patient's advocate, comfort always. He eschewed abortion and the direct killing of patients. His followers were first, last and always, healers. During the past 2500 years, 100 generations of physicians have been schooled in the Hippocratic ethic and have passed it on to succeeding generations. Up until the 1960s, this ethic was espoused, lived and carried out in practice. Nowadays, this beloved tradition, which has been our glory, has been systematically undermined by some physicians and others. To speak against abortion in organized medical circles, one is ignored as abortion is given full sway. Our medical literature is replete with the acceptance of abortion and its sequelae, fetal experimentation, genetic experimentation and in vitro fertilization. Euthanasia is being advocated and will be soon accepted as the way to go under the stress arguments of limited resources, cost containment, relief of human suffering, etc.

How our forebears in medicine will look upon these last two generations of physicians is quite clear to me. How could physicians have lost sight of their role so easily in this modern day? How could the successors of Hippocrates fall away so quickly from the standards which kept them so high in the esteem of their fellowman? These past 98 generations of physicians must bow their heads and weep to see where the modern day

physician has led his profession. It is as though he has lost his bearings and his roots. Has he become so enamored of modern technology and progress that he has lost his feeling for the humanity of the patient? Has the 1990 physician sacrificed his own humanity at the altar of scientific investigation and progress? Has the present day physician reduced himself to a technician and forgotten that a physician is an educated professional with a view toward the transcendence of the human person who has a unique dignity and sacredness given by God?

The modern view of today's physician and his ethical obligation to his fellowman is manifested in some of the statements of officially organized medical groups. In this issue of *Linacre Quarterly*, the American College of Physicians has been brought under criticism for its ethical stance on abortion. The ACP states that a physician must refer a patient for abortion. What a far cry this statement is from the Hippocratic Oath we swore to uphold when we graduated from medical school! For the ACP to make this statement binding on all its members is absurd and certainly unethical. If every member of the ACP takes this seriously, the ACP will have set the stage for a mass exodus from its ranks. Most conscientious physicians of ACP will be forced in conscience to resign, knowing that their conscience comes first over an arbitrary code of ethics which some committee set up.

Dr. H. Tristram Engelhardt from Baylor University, who authored this article and is a physician as well as an internationally-known author on medical ethics, presents his case against the American College of Physicians quite well. It is our hope that ACP will reassess its position and return to a sound ethical position. If it does not, many of its members, including me, will reluctantly have to submit their resignation.

Humanity has not fared too well in recent months. Parliament has passed the Human Fertilization and Embryo Bill which legalizes experiments on human embryos up until the 15th day of development. The ramifications of this legislation upon other countries, including the United States, does not bode well for those of us who hold tenaciously to the sacredness and dignity of human life.

As I prepare to leave for Chicago for the semi-annual meeting of the House of Delegates of the AMA, two resolutions — one from California and the other from New York — caught my eye. They both wish the AMA to support legal availability of RU-486, the French-manufactured antiprogesterone steroid for early abortions, for appropriate research and clinical practice. It will be interesting to see how the House of Delegates handles this one. The very fact that these resolutions were introduced illustrates how far the modern physician and the AMA have strayed from their Hippocratic traditions.

But be of good heart. While our leaders may be led astray, many thousands of physicians throughout this country and the world live, breathe, and carry out the spirit and letter of our Hippocratic oath.

— John P. Mullooly, M.D., Editor