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Current Literature: Abstracts and Titles

Catholic Physicians' Guild

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Material appearing in this column is thought to be of particular interest to the Catholic physician because of its moral, religious, or philosophic content. The medical literature constitutes the primary but not the sole source of such material. In general, abstracts are intended to reflect the substance of the original article. Parenthetical editorial comment may follow the abstract if considered desirable. Books are reviewed rather than summarized. Contributions and comments from readers are invited.

Dr. Eugene Laforet returns to Linacre as conductor of the popular "Abstracts" section, a feature which we hope will be of service to our readers. Dr. Laforet is on the editorial board of Annals of Thoracic Surgery and is Alumni Lecturer in Medical Ethics for the Department of Theology at Boston College. He received the Thomas Linacre Award in 1958 and the Pope John XXIII International Prize for Medical Ethics in 1962.


The health, physical and mental, of people in high places poses great problems for those physicians responsible for its maintenance. The medical histories of Presidents Wilson, Harding, and Roosevelt provide illuminating examples. Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes? asked Juvenal—Who will take care of the caretakers? Sociologically, caretakers include not only government officials, civil and military, but others such as physicians, clergymen, and social workers. Those who care for the caretakers may encounter significant ethical problems. Who assumes responsibility for the physician who becomes mentally incompetent but continues to practice? Who for the President with a serious organic disease that may affect his judgment? "It is necessary to keep in mind that practitioners of medicine face two-fold ethical perplexities: one simply as men and members of society where they encounter problems and make decisions which other men must meet; but then, as members of a specialized and highly trained group, they encounter specialized problems not shared by others. They will have their own codes of behavior and, in the case of both medicine and psychiatry, those codes must be stringent for we deal with the lives of men."


Patient participation in the decision-making process is thwarted by the physician’s Aesculapian authority. This is compounded of his expertise, the patient’s faith in him, and the unwarranted belief that he has almost mystical powers. The Aesculapian concept “does not dispose toward sharing information about diagnostic studies, treatment approaches, prognoses, and other data with the patient.” The nurse, too, may develop such an authoritarian attitude toward the patient, and “if she imposes her own notion

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of what is good onto the patient, she will at the same time reduce his dignity.”


The results of a questionnaire indicate that physicians evaluate chronically and terminally ill patients both in physiologic and sociologic terms. However, there is an apparent disparity between the traditional ethic concerning the therapy of such patients and the actual performance of some physicians. Medical guidelines for the withdrawal of treatment in such instances should be developed in order to avoid this inconsistency.


"Dangerousness to others" is an ill-defined, inaccurate, and overpredicted psychiatric characterization that may result in civil commitment with its involuntary and indeterminate loss of liberty. It seems likely that the invocation of this concept may result in the use of psychiatric professionals as agents of social control rather than as individuals functioning in their traditional role as therapists. And it should be noted that "some of the most predictably and demonstrably dangerous persons," such as drunken drivers, are not preventively detained.


"... there may be an inverse relation between scientific, technologic medicine and freedom of therapeutic choice. If so, this could be the most crucial ethical problem of modern medicine."


"The 'new morality' is a fad—it ignores history, it denies the physical and mental composition of human beings, it is intolerant, exploitative, and is oriented toward intercourse, not love."


A working party of doctors, philosophers, and priests has produced a report on voluntary euthanasia for the Church of England’s Board for Social Responsibility. The report is clear and incisive. It opposes any change in the law that might permit voluntary euthanasia because it would weaken the confidence of patients in their doctors and would create a new form of distress for the sick who might become unduly concerned about being a burden. But most especially objectionable would be the change in attitudes that it would produce.


Bone marrow transplantation is a useful procedure in the management of severe aplastic anemia. However, it poses difficult ethical dilemmas. Continuing concern is needed to protect the rights of children without impeding the scientific advance of pediatrics.


The quality of life for 18 patients on chronic hemodialysis was evaluated by interview. In only six patients was it judged good; it was fair in five and poor in seven. Women adapted better than men.
Chromosomal studies have been performed on all baby boys delivered at a Harvard obstetrical hospital since 1968. Particular attention has been paid to XYY patterns, at one time thought by some to be associated with asocial behavior. Although the concept of a "criminal chromosome" has been discarded, however, the XYY pattern may be associated with learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties. The study was attacked, largely on philosophic and sociologic grounds, and a formal faculty inquiry was made which approved continuation of the study by a vote of about 200 to 30. Despite this, continuing harassment of one of the two primary investigators has resulted in suspension of the study.

Misunderstanding of the purpose and limitation of medical ethics has occasioned a backlash. Medical ethics is simply general ethics applied to a special area, and as such it relies on general ethical principles. In addition, it is involved in structuring the issues. Among its limitations is the fact that "ethics is a fairly blunt instrument" and the fact that many of its key concepts must be found in other disciplines. But ethics is not just a matter of opinion. "Arguments, facts, and good reasons are very much to the point. The object of ethics is a harmonious and just society, and that is a matter for careful reasoning; one opinion is simply not as useful to that end as any other opinion."

In the experimental situation there is universal acceptance of the requirement that the informed consent of the subject be obtained. However, there are numerous obstacles in the practical sphere that make informed consent virtually impossible. A surrogate system might obviate many of the difficulties associated with the traditional means of securing informed consent.

The Supreme Court decision in *Roe v Wade* reflected the general public mood toward the subject of abortion. However, the recent Edelin case indicates that “the divisive moral issue of abortion seriously challenges the legitimacy of our diverse society.” Although liberal attitudes toward abortion are favored by most Americans, the Edelin verdict has encouraged the introduction of legislation challenging the Supreme Court ruling. Physicians can help assuage the problem by reaffirming the legitimacy of diverse views on abortion.


In the near future it may be technically possible for parents to choose the sex of their offspring before conception. Technologic aspects of sex predetermination are reviewed, and implications of a demographic, sociologic, and epidemiologic nature are discussed.


An overly rigid attitude concerning the requirements of medical ethics is inimical to medical progress.

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Readers interested in submitting abstracts, please send to:

Eugene G. Laforet, M.D.
2000 Washington St.
Newton Lower Falls, Mass. 02162

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