

The Philosopher's Stone



Bioethics and the New Frontier of Science

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Medical Ethics, a subdivision of Bioethics, concerns moral issues that may arise in the fields of medical treatment and research. More generally, the term is also often applied to ethical issues that involve other disciplines as well, such as nursing, law, philosophy, and theology.

An interest in the ethical consequences of medical practice and research probably dates back at least as far as Hippocrates (460?-377? B.C.), who practiced and taught medicine on the Greek island of Kos. The Hippocratic Oath, which is often connected with his name (but which many now believe to have originated with a Pythagorean sect in the 4th century B.C.), originally forbid any physician from using his or her art for harm, as well as prohibiting

participation in surgery and abortion.

Closer to our own time, the 18th-century English physician Thomas Percival created a code of ethics that would later serve as the foundation for the American Medical Associations first code of ethics established in 1846. And still more recently, a concern over ethical issues played a role in the establishment of the Nuremberg Code, an ethical code directed toward human research, and created as a response to the horrible abuses of Nazi experimenters in World War II.

Even in the United States, gross abuses of power have occurred, as in the case of the Tuskegee Study, in which U.S. Public Health Service researchers withheld for forty years information about diagnoses and effective treatments of syphilis from a group of black men participating in a government-funded research program.

Today, however, with the ever-increasing advances of science, our dilemmas do not necessarily involve intentional abuses of power, though these may still be secretly occurring.

Just as troubling are those ethical questions that may arise because our science has outstripped our ability to foresee its consequences.

What dilemmas are created when death can no longer be so easily defined, since mechanical ventilators and heart-lung machines can keep patients "alive" sometimes indefinitely? What should a doctor do when a terminal patient in excruciating pain can no longer gain relief through medicine? What ethical questions arise when the point of viability for fetuses living independently of their mothers continues to be pushed back toward conception? And how is this issue complicated by research which is discovering growing uses for fetal tissues to treat diseases? What are the consequences of genetic experiments which are leading us increasingly toward the time when genetic eugenics will be a reality? These are just a few of the questions that will face us in the 21st century.

Come to Gamble Hall, Room 213 (Honors Room), on Tuesday, January 26th, at 8:00 p.m. and share your ideas.

Quotations

We have to ask ourselves whether medicine is to remain a humanitarian and respected profession or a new but depersonalized science in the service of prolonging life rather than diminishing human suffering.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

(from Chapter 2 of **On Death and Dying**, 1969)

There is not much that even the most socially responsible scientists can do as individuals, or even as a group, about the social consequences of their activities.

E. J. Hobsbawm

(British historian in *New York Review of Books*, November 19, 1970)

The medical establishment has become a major threat to health. Iatrogenesis, the name for this new epidemic, comes from iatros, the Greek word for "physician," and genesis, meaning "origin."

Ivan Illich

(**Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health,**

Some Resources

Encyclopedia of Bioethics
(Ed. Warren Reich, 2500pps, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1995)

ELSI (an acronym for Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications of the Human Genome Project) maintains a detailed website, assembling articles, policies, and other bioethics information at www.nhgri.nih.gov/ELSI/.

Biomedical Ethics: Readings on the Internet (an Internet site devoted to bioethics) at www.uwc.edu/fonddulac/faculty/rriqteri/biomed.htm

Bioethics Links (created by University of Chicago's McLean Center for Bioethics) at <http://ccme-mac4.bsd.uchicago.edu/CCMEDocs/others>

Basic Resources in Bioethics at <http://guweb.georgetown.edu/nrcbl/scopenotes/Sn15>

Meeting Times for Spring Semester

All meetings are at 8 p.m. in Room 213 (Honors Room) in Gamble Hall.

Tuesday, January 26
Tuesday, February 16
Tuesday, March 9
Tuesday, March 30

Contributions

The PDG is always open to new ideas. If you've got any submissions or suggestions, please e-mail us at one of the addresses below or drop a note in the thought box in the Writing Center in Gamble 109.

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