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Reflections on the Role of the Ethics Center at WMU

Shirley Bach, Associate Director

When I think about what sparked my interest in the development of a university-wide Center that nurtured critical thinking about ethical issues in contemporary life, both in the classroom and in the community, I reflect on the 10 years preceding the birth of the Ethics Center 25 years ago. You will note that my role, and therefore my example, is heavily weighted on my prior interest in biology and medicine. First and foremost, I was energized by taking part in two interdisciplinary workshops sponsored by the Hastings Center, the first at Berkeley in 1973 on bioethics, and the second at Dartmouth on clinical medical ethics. This was a time when astounding discoveries were being made in medicine that had considerable potential for benefit as well as some problems:

- We could help infertile couples to have wanted children and we could help fertile individuals to avoid having unwanted children. Ethical issues were raised, for example, about the propriety of in vitro fertilization.
- We were investigating the role of genes in normal and abnormal development, hoping to prevent or ameliorate the effects of deleterious genes, both before and after birth. Questions arose about the special nature of genetic intervention.
- We were investigating different treatments for mental illness, both pharmaceutical and other novel interventions, directed at alternatives to long-term hospitalization. Questions were raised about the capacity

of children, as well as mentally ill adults, to consent to participate in such research. One dramatic case involved a proposed surgical intervention in the brain in order to treat sexual pathology.

-We could substitute a technological replacement (dialysis) for a failing human kidney, but issues arose about how to pay for the procedure as well as how to prioritize access when the need outgrew the supply. When kidney transplantation became another alternative to dialysis, to generate a supply of organs, ethical issues arose which tied together the need to develop a new definition of death with the supply of organs.

Investigative journalists and a few research scholars were bringing some unbelievable abuses to public attention as well as congressional attention (e.g. the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, where the effects of untreated syphilis were studied without the patients' knowledge that they were in a research study). Another less well known example was carried out at the Brooklyn Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital, where live cancer cells were injected into elderly ill patients in order to study the rate of rejection of foreign tissue.

While some reasonable investigations into these abuses were being launched, there were also some uncivil and unreasonable protests being launched. Just one example, among many, involved a scientist, with his leg in a cast and on crutches, being drenched with ice water as he attempted to present a talk on sociobiology. There were reports of researchers, studying the genetic basis of certain behaviors, being threatened in order to thwart the direction of the research. Some of the recent political rhetoric directed at biomedical technology reminds me of those earlier protests.

It seemed time then to have a forum for discussion of these compelling and important issues, issues where good people may disagree, but where the science and the ethics could be

explored in an atmosphere of civility and reason. That forum is the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society.

This surely is the season to express gratitude, so I wanted to say that I am grateful to have had the opportunity both to develop courses in medical and health care ethics and also to work toward the formation of the Western Michigan University Ethics Center. The two often overlap since students in my courses were encouraged, perhaps even bribed, to attend programs of the Ethics Center.

Many of the programs we sponsored in biomedical ethics were done in collaboration with Bronson and Borgess Hospitals and I hope that we will continue this cooperation, especially as we work toward establishment of our medical school.

Topics for public presentations, in the fields of my interest ranged across the health care spectrum:

- Should Nazi doctors' data be used for potential good? (Arthur Elstein)
- Placebo Surgery: Moral Muddle or Praiseworthy Practice? (Jonathan Hopkins)
- Must We Ration Health Care? (Arthur Caplan)
- Single Payer Health Insurance (James Mitchiner)
- Dogs that Aren't Barking: Under-explored Issues in Health Care Ethics (Howard Brody)
- Americans Who Cared: The Rescue Work of Varian Fry (Pierre Sauvage)
- Professional Medical Ethics (Edmund Pellegrino)
- Medical Mistakes and Professional Responsibility

Other invited speakers include John Stone, Adrienne Asch, Joanne Lynn, Mark Siegler, Tom Beauchamp, and more. Other faculty involved in the Ethics Center can surely add many more topics and many other speakers to our list of public programs, but I started this discussion by saying that I would limit my reflection to programs in the areas of my special

interests, so I must apologize for not including highlights in programming in journalism, engineering, business,

One of my favorite sayings by Mark Twain which continues to guide me is: "Always do right. This will gratify some of the people and astonish the rest."

My hope is to continue to explore what is right, the basis for determining what is right, and to be able to explore this in an atmosphere of civility, scholarship, and reason. Hopefully the Ethics Center will play an important role in the development of Medical School programs, since ethics is at the heart and soul of good medicine.