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A New Start: Rebirth of The Online Journal of Health Ethics

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A New Start: Rebirth of The Online Journal of Health Ethics

To our devoted coeditors, reviewers, authors and consumers, thanks for patience as the Online Journal of Health Ethics (OJHE) transitioned to its current home. Within this nearly two years that it has taken for the journal to 'settle' down with all the jiggles worked out on its new server, the world of health ethics has continued to emerge with demands for attention. Morrison's book: *Health Care Ethics: Critical Issues for the 21st Century* (2008) does a nice job of outlining what is perceived to be the major ethical issues that most of us have already commenced discussion on. Authors in this current issue of the OJHE address eight of the areas Morrison identified.

In addition to what Morrison forecasts, current headline news has ethicists reeling once more to determine the right thing to do. For instance, who are the real victims of the Gulf oil spill? And, once identified, how does one compensate for long term health effects? How is nature compensated for irreversible effects? Is an appropriate system in place to ensure that 'tainted' sea life does not enter the food chain? What are the long term health implications of the spill on the environment? Who is to be paid for the disaster? Who is to blame?

Another emergent ethical issue to ponder is the new HIV vaccine. With its promise to prevent the contraction of the virus, how will the determination be made as to who is most 'deserving' to receive the vaccine? Will it be dispensed to those currently practicing risky sexual behaviors? Or, does it go to those who plan to have sexual encounters with those already infected? Or, is it to be limited to those who might 'accidentally' become infected such as health care workers? Will the vaccine be preventive or permissive? Other considerations are who gets to dispense the vaccine and what is the 'equitable' price tag for this silver bullet? Should the price be offset by the government (local, state or federal) or is this an insurance issue? We have only tapped the potential ethical dilemmas for this remarkable discovery.

Last, but certainly not least, what about Health Care Reform? After having served on the Institute of Medicine Committee for three years to investigate the consequences of uninsurance, I

struggle to try to understand some of the sentiment against it? People die because they do not have the money for medicine and health care. I am adamant that a nation is only secured to the extent that its citizens are insured. I would challenge each of you to read the history related to this movement to offer coverage to all citizens of the United States. The list of opponents has always included some health professional groups. And the band plays on.....

We are pleased to present this issue as our new and improved Online Journal of Health Ethics. In this issue, Dr. Smith of Perth, Western Australia examines the constitutionality of the use of electronic health records and patient privacy laws. Smith concludes that in Australia, the new privacy laws broadened the permissible access to patients' medical records rather than reducing it. I submit that there are poignant considerations for other countries adopting this form of electronic record keeping.

Life or Death? When does it begin and what constitutes the sanctity of life continues to conjure ethical issues. Dr. Williams presents a phenomenological study on the experiences of mid-life widows and the ethical implications for nurses. Williamson concludes that a challenge for healthcare providers attending to those in the shadow of death is to provide an authentic presence and to recognize and preserve the vulnerable trust patients place in them. Related to this, Dr. Stewart's article, telling the Truth, admonishes health care workers of an ethical necessity of telling patients the truth about their diagnosis and prognosis during a process that unfolds over time. In the Teaching Nursing Students Empathic Communication article by Dr. McMillan, we are reminded that empathy is the foundation of understanding patient's needs. A case study is presented of a nursing student who had already been socialized 'out of empathy'. This attitude was manifested by the student as a stronger preference for care for machines than for terminally ill patients. The question begs, how much are health care educational institutions doing to 'teach' empathy? That brings us to the age old adage, can empathy be taught? We may not be able to answer that, but as health care professionals, it is my opinion that we need to work hard to 'convince' those that we care for that we are indeed empathetic to them. To bring this ethical duty home, one must read Ms. Tatum and Dr. Gunn's article, Safeguarding Dignity, presents the story of Gwen, a stroke victim. This heartwarming story reminds us of the frailty of humans. The only difference between victim and provider is that one is being cared for at that moment and the

other is rendering the care at that moment. We are all part of the human family and are subject to life events.

Is contract pregnancy exploitation in action? You will want to examine the views of Ms. Relph on this hot topic in the reproductive scientific community. Relph does an in-depth inquiry which challenges some of the commonly held beliefs about this practice. From a different perspective, Lisa Sternke' article addresses ethical considerations of nonmedical preconception gender selection research. If you can choose what the sex of your infant is prior to conception, what's the problem? Presented are ethical arguments on both sides of this ethical debate. Opponents argue that this practice may lead to gender discrimination and possibly eugenics. Whereas, proponents argue that it is a parental right. Surely, as the technology increases, so will the debate.

Transitioning from life to death, the next two articles bring readers to the terminal point. Sine's article, EMS, Suicide, and the Out-of-Hospital DNR Order, argues that patient autonomy could possibly be placed at odds with what is termed the 'rescue mentality' of Emergency Medical Service personnel when summoned and an out-of-hospital Do Not Resuscitate order is in place. Explored are the ethical principles of autonomy and beneficence. In Dr. Welie's article, Pitfalls of Legal Regulation to Improve End-of-Life Care, a critical analysis of the 'Nebraskans for Human Care' group proposed amendment to the Nebraska constitution is done. The proposed amendment would have required that hydration be administered to any person and with any means available. Provided are the serious ethical and other consequences that such a legal regulation would have.

To sum, Dr. Johnson's article, The Identification and Resolution of Ethical Issues in Health Care: Theoretical and Practical Viewpoints, provides an overview of major ethical issues in the health care industry along with strategies for resolution. It's always welcome news when someone else has worked it out!

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