Editorial: Ethical Boundaries

Many years ago human freak shows were the orcas in captivity, and to instead encourage people to see the Orca (killer whale) show the number of visitors fell by a quarter. Clearly the bioethical choice was not to keep the orcas in captivity, and to instead encourage people to go whale watching on boats in the ocean (if done sensitively). Many years ago human freak shows were attractions, and even Siamese twins were made famous (and could generate an income) by being entertainers. Exploitation however is an easy boundary to cross, and setting boundaries and standards lessened the opportunity for blatant exploitation of the vulnerable that used to occur.

Tonmoy Biswas and Macer explore the attitudes of medical students in Bangladesh towards what are acceptable gifts from the representatives of pharmaceutical companies. This issue is of concern all around the world, but the results indicate that it is one which needs to be better discussed in medical ethics education. There are many avenues for education, but interestingly the students whose parents were physicians seemed to be more sensitive to the question, at least in their attitudes expressed in the survey. The paper includes an analysis of correlations with gender, academic year, exposure to pharmaceutical reps, and others factor in a lot of tables. International comparisons are made, and further research on this topic will be useful. It will be particularly interesting to see examples of correlation of attitude with specific teaching materials in the curriculum.

Saeideh Sayari et al. call for a broader examination of religious ethical principles in Muslim countries that impose very restrictive regulations on abortion. A broader concept of health of the mother will be useful for ethical judgment in many moral dilemmas. Abortion is clearly a contentious issue, but we need to consider the broader goals of love of life, and the health of the family.

Carol Rizkalla reviews some of the dilemmas of human germ-line editing. As someone who wrote about these issues in the 1990s, we can see that despite some moratoriums on germ-line genetic interventions, as some medical interventions such as mitochondrial donation have become safe, we have to reconsider the boundaries.

One of the concerns of the therapy-enhancement “divide” is boundaries. Should we simply allow law to determine what is ethical? How much do these boundaries change over time and place? Should we legislate and punish violators of some boundary between the legal and illegal? These are central questions of bioethics that allow us to move closer to promoting a “good-life” for all moral agents. Education is clearly critical for students, legislators, and all citizens to explore the underlying moral values.

- Darryl Macer


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Contact: Kimiko Tashima, ktashima@kumamoto-u.ac.jp
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