

**FALL 2004**

## We Live in Ethical Times

"WE LIVE IN ETHICAL TIMES," someone recently said. They certainly didn't mean that everyone was running around doing ethical things. They meant that our society seems intensely interested in the many and complex ethical problems that are cropping up everywhere. In business, in politics, in science, in family life, in legal and in medical practice, distortions of values disrupt our long settled expectations of what is right and good.

Everyone seems to be talking about "values" these days. "Values" means something different to each person and, possibly, very little to some. CPMC has just opened a new Program in Medicine and Human Values. Through this Newsletter, ETHICAL TIMES, we want you to know what we mean by that loaded word "values" and others associated with it, like "ethics."

We will do this by telling you what we do to make values real. Our Program reaches throughout CPMC. Our first task is to support the work of the CPMC Ethics Committee. Our second task is to help educate our physicians in training in the Departments of Medicine, Psychiatry, Ophthalmology and Radiation Oncology whose curriculum requires ethics education. Our third task is to provide consultation on ethical problems to all practitioners in medicine, nursing and social work who seek our help. We will do the same for patients and their families. Our fourth task is to produce lectures and conferences on ethical topics of interest to the professional community and to the public. These topics, such as care of the dying, use of scarce medical resources, organ donation, treatment for the uninsured, appear regularly in the media. We believe we can explain them more clearly than do the reporters and commentators.

Why all this discussion of ethics and values in medicine? Modern medicine is terribly complex. Your own doctor has received an elaborate education in the technical details of scientific medicine. He or she has acquired the skills to apply that knowledge to your care. In something as simple as an office visit, a very complex process is taking place in your doctor's mind. In addition, the office itself is not just a simple space. It is filled with files, instruments, communication devices. It is staffed by technically trained assistants.

That familiar office is connected to an elaborate system of specialty consultants, referrals, clinics and laboratories, and all of these are surrounded by extremely complex systems of record keeping, insurance, financing, government regulations and institutional policy. A vast industry produces drugs and devices. A vast research enterprise, public and private, produces and tests innovative treatments. A vast educational system produces doctors, nurses and technicians. Huge amounts of money flow through this system. All of this stands behind you and your doctor when you meet face to face.

It is easy to see, then, that all this complexity can literally complicate something that you and your doctor want to be very simple and straightforward, namely, making and keeping you healthy and strong. The one value that both of you cherish is your own hope that you will be well. If you feel good and strong, you want to remain that way. If you are worried that something might be wrong, you want to know and you want it fixed. If you are ill, you want to be well. If you can't be completely well, you want to be as well as you can be. That is the Human Value that our new Program intends to support.

*We Live in Ethical Times, continued on back*

**William Andereck, M.D.** and **Albert Jonsen, Ph.D.** are the Co-directors of the Program.

**Dr. Andereck** has practiced Internal Medicine in San Francisco since 1979, after graduating from the University of Tennessee at Memphis Medical School, he started as an intern and resident at CPMC. A fellowship from National Endowment for the Humanities allowed him to study medical ethics for a period at Vanderbilt University and later to continue this study while in residency at CPMC. He has been Chair of the CPMC Institutional Ethics Committee since 1985 and served on the Council for Ethical Affairs of the California Medical Association since 1990. He is now a Trustee of the CMA.

**Albert Jonsen, Ph.D.** (Yale '67) established the teaching of medical ethics at University of California, San Francisco in 1972, where he became Chief of the Division of Medical Ethics. He moved to University of Washington School of Medicine in 1987, where he chaired the Department of Medical History and Ethics until 1999. He has served on five government commissions on issues of medical ethics and is an elected member of the Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Science. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award of the American Society of Bioethics and the Humanities. He is author of *The Birth of Bioethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and *Clinical Ethics* (McGraw-Hill, 5th edition, 2001)

**Kathleen Warinski** is the Administrator of the Program. She graduated from the University of Nebraska and has worked as a program coordinator at UCSF, Kaiser San Francisco and University of Nebraska. She has lived in the Bay Area for thirty-seven years.

**James "Wes" McGaughey** is the Program's Research Associate. He is from Southern California and is currently studying political science and international relations at San Francisco State University. His last employment was in social research in the Office of State Senator Jackie Speier, 8th District.

*We Live in Ethical Times, continued from front page*

Simple enough! Well, not quite. Because of the complexity of the system, that Value is often hard to see and harder to realize. The reason is that the value of healthy life is not the same for all humans. It takes the shape of your personality, of your life experience, of your history and your age and your family and companions. Health might be a biological thing: your heart and lungs and brain all working right, but it is much more than that. Health is yourself as you wish to be and as you understand yourself.

So the value of health is based on what we call, using a fancy word, autonomy: your dignity as an individual choosing what you want for yourself and your own. Ethics is about protecting this most basic value. It needs protection from all the forces and pressures of the complex institution of health care where you meet your doctor. You want your doctor to know what you want and he or she wants to know what you want. That communication can be obstructed by all the technology and data and rules and financing that makes up the institutions of health care. It is not easy to keep that basic human value in full view. Persons can be reduced to numbers or objects to make the system run more efficiently. Your personality and dignity can be obscured so that the technology can flow, uninterrupted by individuality. Modern medical ethics is the effort to sustain the human value of autonomy, and the derived values of health, in the midst of this complexity.

The Program in Medicine and Human Values is designed to support these values at CPMC. In *ETHICAL TIMES* we will explain how we intend to do that. In each issue, we will explain one of the tasks of this Program.

## Coming in the next *ETHICAL TIMES*

Your father is enjoying the first year of real retirement. He has just sold the small manufacturing company that he founded and ran for fifty years. He is a vigorous and vivacious man of 75 and he and your mom look forward to travel and relaxation. Their plans are interrupted by a sudden event: Dad suffers a serious stroke. Two weeks later, he is still in Intensive Care, dependent on a respirator and unable to communicate. Doctors tell you that, while he might survive, he will probably suffer permanent physical and mental damage. Your mom, you and your siblings have to decide. Your doctor suggests that you seek an ethics consultation. The next issue of *ETHICAL TIMES* will explain what a hospital ethics committee is and how it helps patients, families and doctors.