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REVIEWS

DICTIONARY OF MEDICAL ETHICS. Revised and Enlarged Edition. Edited by A. S. Duncan. G. R. Dunstan and R. B. Welbourn. Darton. Longman & Todd. £12.50.

Is disease a punishment for sin? Christians may think so, and some Hindus. Or might it be caused by evil spells? Animists from Chad to Haiti would say yes. Few people now think with Galen that it consists in a derangement of "humours".

The beliefs people hold about the nature of disease are their own affair-until they assume the role of healer. From such beliefs spring medical ethics. These concern us all, for we are all patients at some time. In this book they are exhaustively set forth in entries contributed by 148 experts, edited by a triumvirate of professors.

The Hippocratic oath (dating from 400 BC) is still the cornerstone. "To please no one will I prescribe a deadly drug, nor give advice which may cause his death." So much for voluntary euthanasia. "Nor will I give a woman a pessary to procure abortion." So much for the woman's rights over her own body. Declarations of the World Medical Association provide updated detail. There are six of them, beginning at Geneva in 1948: "I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception. . ." For euthanasia and abortion, no progress in 2,300 years.

The flavour of the collection can be given by paraphrasing some of the 342 titles, which cover what the TES reviewer of the first edition justly described as a rapidly-expanding field.

Animal experiment. Used (1) for testing new medical products and implants, (2) for assessing danger in non-medical products, and (3) for furthering knowledge as a basis of medical or surgical advance. Most people consider these uses justified if pain is avoided (where possible). Hostility varies according to the degree of affection felt for the species involved (lapdogs come top). Research workers prefer - specific pathogen-free animals, removed from the uterus in a sterile manner and reared in isolation. Work is in progress on a European Convention to protect "experimental animals".

Castration. Use of this to provide attendants for harems or treble-voiced choristers is now regarded as unethical.

Christian Science. Adherents hold that "healing is an aspect of Christian regeneration, a natural effect of drawing closer to God in spirit and in the comprehension of the infinitude of His goodness and power". Nevertheless "it is fairly common for....."

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.....adherents to have a broken bone set by a doctor".

Counselling. Advice given to patients or parents. [Not a good definition: the essence of modern counselling technique is to draw out rather than put in.]

Fluoridation. Raising the fluoride content of a public water supply to the optimum level required to reduce dental caries. Opponents argue that it is unethical as (1) removing the right to pure water, (2) contravening the right to choose medication, and (3) constituting a health hazard. Proponents retort that it is more unethical to deprive people of a remedy scientifically proved to halve the incidence of tooth decay.

Homosexuality. A practising psychiatrist discusses the ethical dilemma involved in "treatment". If the condition is accepted as treatable it is being looked on as an illness. So the psychotherapist or behaviourist aiming at re-orientation is tacitly accepting, even encouraging, society's stigmatising attitudes towards homosexuality. The answer suggested is for the therapist to encourage "genuine involvement and self-determination on the part of the client in designing the treatment contract".

Hospices. As with education of the young, care of the dying, when administered by a Roman Catholic or other sect, raises ethical problems. They are not discussed in this entry. The nearest we get is in the eleventh and last of a list of principles said to apply to hospices: "Affirmations of faith may be made but never imposed; each individual has to grow into a fuller (though never complete) realisation of the truths he accepts." An admirable sentiment, if hopelessly impractical. To ensure a lingering death in an odour of sanctity is at last to be overwhelmed by it.

Human rights. Maurice Cranston contributes an entry suggesting that human rights are scarcely more than matters of opinion. When the right to life conflicts with the right to liberty which should succeed? "Life," says Hobbes. Locke insists on liberty. The right to life may justify capital punishment (because a murderer forfeits his own right by taking away that of another), or justify its abolition. It may, as the Stoics held, embrace the right to take one's own life, or may deny it. It may extend to the foetus (and so forbid abortion) or begin only at viable birth. And what of the pregnant woman's right to liberty?

Spiritual healing. Healing power may be a gift from God, or may be derived from spirits. Alternatively it may be claimed by individuals without any overt religious belief. There is difficulty, in both theory and practice, in distinguishing between the spiritual and the psychological. Yet, whatever its basis, spiritual healing can exert a beneficial influence on the patient's emotional state, and so contribute to recovery.

This is a fascinating, if untidy book. The untidiness comes from presenting opinions derived from many different viewpoints with no attempt at integration. The entry on hospital chaplains is written by one of them; it would have been very different if the author had been a long-stay patient. Others are similarly one-sided, for example *psychopathy* (by a prison doctor), *moral autonomy* (by a lecturer in Christian ethics), *truth* (by a Lord of Appeal), *ludaism* (by a rabbi), *Christian Science* (by a Christian Scientist), *hospices* (by a hospice director). But at least the names and qualifications of the contributors are openly given. Many of them are highly distinguished.

The book would be improved by an index. If we can't have this in the next edition, a list of the entries would help. That there will be another edition is not in doubt. The work is a valuable sourcebook on many vexing issues of modern life.

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