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Book Review

The Ethics of Medical Practice

John Marshall, M.D.

Book Review by

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If authorship is a valid criterion, problems of medical ethics have been primarily the province of moral theologians. Coincident with the burgeoning of medical science, however, has been a subtle but definite shift in emphasis from moral principles that may have an incidental medical context to medical problems with innate moral implications. Symptomatic of this trend, perhaps, is the appearance of such books as this of Dr. Marshall. As a Reader in Clinical Neurology in the University of London, and a layman, he has produced a well-written, concise, timely, and authoritative synopsis of Catholic medical ethics.

The opening chapter is wisely devoted to a discussion of ethical principles as such, forming the basis for much of what follows. This serves to orient the reader whose training in ethics and ontology may have been less extensive than in pediatrics and dermatology. But even for him who

chances to be *au courant* it is a valuable review.

Subsequent chapters deal with "General Principles in Medical Practice," "The General Obligations of the Doctor," and "The Doctor in Relation to His Patient," the last containing specific information about medical confidences and "telling the patient." There follows a knowledgeable section on the use of drugs with special reference to the moral principles that obtain.

In Chapter 6, "The Ethics of Surgery," the writer discusses general norms applicable to surgery, as well as such specific topics as cosmetic surgery and organ transplantation. Use of the term "mutilation" (a favorite in texts on moral theology), as distinct from surgery in general, he considers to be best avoided, since the distinction "has little meaning medically" and is merely one of degree, not of kind. He might also have added that the connotation of "mutila-

tion" is hardly flattering to the surgeon who must reluctantly resort to radical procedures in order to save life. (In a later section, page 144, the author refers to routine hymenectomy as "an unnecessary mutilation," a phrase that should perhaps be altered in future editions in the interest of consistency).

Chapter 7, "Fertility and Sterility," deals with infertility, artificial insemination, and contraception, and the following chapter is devoted to sterilization. Brief note is accorded "the pill." Obstetric-related problems, including abortion, are discussed in Chapters 9 and 10. There follows a 13-page exposition of the moral aspects of psychiatry that is necessarily circumscribed and basic but nevertheless manages to be objective, interesting, and fairly complete. Chapter 12 consists of a sensible presentation of sexual difficulties in which the writer competently avoids the dual pitfalls of puritanism and permissiveness.

"Medical Experimentation in Man" (Chapter 13) has concerned the profession since Hippocrates but it took the Nuremberg trials to focus the attention of the world on its moral hazards. The general difficulties in such experiments, as well as ethical principles for their solution, are succinctly presented by the author. However, the ideal type of controlled clinical trial, and one that may be expected to enjoy wider usage, is the "double-blind study," in which, to exclude bias, neither the attending physician nor his patient has knowledge of what

agent is being used. This poses problems that are not as readily answered and it is hoped that in future editions this facet might be discussed.

The book concludes with a chapter entitled, "The Spiritual Care of Patients," in which baptism, the Eucharist, and extreme unction are considered in sufficient detail. However, some brief comment should have been accorded the sacrament of penance, since a clear and drug-free sensorium is desirable for its worthy reception. In addition, it would have been helpful to describe how a physician can assist his dying patient in making an act of perfect contrition.

The index is adequate. As a matter of personal preference, and not as a criticism, the documentation throughout the book, could perhaps have been more explicit and extensive. In addition, a compendium of pertinent references—journals, articles, and books—would have added to its overall utility. In general, however, *The Ethics of Medical Practice* seems to have fulfilled the author's objectives admirably and can be highly recommended as a basic introduction to medical ethics for the Catholic medical student or physician.

The Ethics of Medical Practice
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