

# Ethics and Medics

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON MORAL ISSUES IN THE HEALTH AND LIFE SCIENCES

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## MEDICAL—MORAL ISSUES: *The Counselor's Dilemma*

(FIRST OF A SERIES)

The previous issue of *Ethics and Medics* contained a list of twelve of the most difficult moral problems in medicine. But simply to raise questions is not enough. Answers must be provided, if only tentative ones. This issue begins a series in which each of the questions raised will be examined and guidelines for an answer provided.

**Case:** Mr. L., a twenty-five-year-old man contemplating marriage, comes to a medical geneticist for counseling. Mr. L.'s father has recently died at the age of forty-nine of Huntington's disease, and knowing that the condition is inherited, Mr. L. is concerned about the possibility that he might be affected. The disease does not normally begin to manifest itself until about the age of thirty-five, but its course is irreversible: gradual loss of motor control, dementia, and finally death between the ages of forty-five and fifty. The last few years of his father's life were anquishing ones for everyone involved. The counselor informs Mr. L. that one-half of the offspring of parents affected by Huntington's disease can be expected to be similarly affected, and that at present there is no reliable test for determining who is carrying the defective gene. Mr. L. will have to wait for the symptoms to appear or not appear. The counselor asks Mr. L. whether he has told his prospective spouse about his situation, and Mr. L. replies that he has decided to bear his burden in silence and provide her with at least ten happy years of marriage. Dilemma: What should the counselor do? The woman will unsuspectingly marry a man who may have a most grim future in store and be at risk for producing similarly affected offspring.

**Response:** *Option (a):* The counselor should urge his client to tell the woman, and if Mr. L. refuses to do so, then tell her himself. The objection to this response is that it advocates a breach of the requirement of confidentiality and could serve to undermine confidence in the individual counselor and in the profession. *Option (b):* Do nothing; the counselor's job is to present his client with the relevant medical facts and let Mr. L. make up his own mind about what he ought to do on the basis of Mr. L.'s values; Mr. L. did not come to the counselor for moral advice and the counselor has no particular expertise in that area; he is not the moral judge. But such an approach fails to take account of human

and religious obligations. Vatican II's document on "The Church in the Modern World" makes it clear that Christians should "be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical expertises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God" (#43). *Preferred Option (c):* In a manner consistent with respect for Mr. L.'s dignity, the counselor should point out the moral issues involved and urge Mr. L. to tell his prospective wife, but should not take it upon himself to disclose the information against his client's wishes. Such a response appears to be the most consistent with his moral and religious duties toward his client, his profession, and fellow members of his society.

## Laetrile and Freedom of Choice

**FACT:** Because of frequent news items appearing in print and on TV, the general public is becoming increasingly aware of the sometimes bitter controversy surrounding the use of the substance Laetrile as a treatment for certain forms of cancer. "Laetrile" is a name for amygdalin, a substance that can easily be produced from ground apricot pits. Since 1963 it has been banned by the FDA from interstate commerce. Most of the Laetrile now being used in the United States is apparently manufactured in Tijuana, Mexico, and smuggled across the border. The FDA has been attempting to remove Laetrile from the market on the grounds that it has been neither generally recognized as safe nor approved as a new drug for investigation. One study conducted in the early 1970's at the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research found that the drug helped inhibit the spread of breast tumors in mice; but studies conducted at three other centers failed

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