



News and Views
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FOR THE
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ESSAY

Pandemics and Professional Obligations
Conference a Success

The timing, in hindsight, could not have been better. Five days before news of the swine flu outbreak hit the media, IMH completed its conference on “Emerging Infectious Diseases: Ethics, Law and Professional Obligation.” The conference explored in particular the health professional’s duty to treat patients despite some level of personal risk.



The conference resulted from a series of important collaborations. IMH began to look at the “duty to treat” issues about two years ago and pulled together an informal advisory committee that included School of Nursing faculty as well as representatives from hospital epidemiology and infection control. When we decided to proceed with a conference, IMH partnered with UTMB’s Institute on Human

Infections and Immunity to present the annual McLaughlin Symposium. We secured additional funding from the NIH and the Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund. The conference

received the endorsement of the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities. Dr. James LeDuc of the Galveston National Laboratory worked closely with Drs. Eric Avery and Howard Brody of IMH on the conference planning. IMH staff as well as UTMB CME staff worked hard on the final details.

We had originally planned the conference for early November, 2008 but a certain weather event made those dates impossible. We were most fortunate that nearly all of the speakers we had originally invited agreed to come for the new dates of April 16-18, 2009.

The conference was highly successful in illustrating a number of key points:

Value of interdisciplinary inquiry. We planned the conference as a demonstration project for IMH’s commitment to an interdisciplinary approach to medical issues. Speakers represented various disciplines within the humanities as well as infectious diseases and public health. We addressed the duty to treat from the perspectives of ethics, law, history, literature, and the visual arts.



Due to Ike, the Institute for the Medical Humanities is now located in the PCP. The Institute’s main office is PCP 2.301. Below are the office locations and current phone numbers for our faculty.

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Howard Brody	PCP 2.309	772-9385
Michele Carter	PCP 2.259C	772-5835
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Limits of “professional” answers. It is tempting to locate the ethical duty to treat within the purview of the professionalism of the nurse or physician. Several speakers challenged this. Dr. Anne Hudson Jones quoted Camus’s *The Plague*, “Let us all be the one who stays,” arguing that the ultimate duty lies on our common humanity. Douglas Brown, staff ethicist at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, described his work with the hospital housekeeping staff, whose status as “non-professionals” does not diminish their strong sense of a duty to the institution and its patients at a time of crisis.

Impact of social justice. Professor Alexander Capron of USC described the evolution of the “Bellagio Statement” on pandemics, calling for renewed attention to social and international justice as a core dimension of pandemic planning. He showed, for example, how the world’s ability to contain a future outbreak of avian flu might hinge upon factors that include whether an Indonesian poultry farmer will be ostracized by his neighbors if it becomes known that his flock was infected; and whether the government of Vietnam has sufficient money to pay a fair market price for poultry that must be destroyed.

Need for trustworthy communication. Many speakers cited the absolute need for good-quality public health information in the event of a future outbreak, and the hope that the community, including vulnerable populations, will find those information sources sufficiently trustworthy to act upon. That raises the question—can we wait until a pandemic is upon us for trust to be established? What sorts of communication ought to be occurring well in advance of a pandemic? Is trust created by merely telling the community the facts; or does it also require active listening?

“Emerging Infectious Diseases: Ethics, Law and Professional Obligation” was a great success. Plans are now in process to disseminate the results of the conference more widely.

— Howard Brody

—Artwork by Eric Avery

IMH NEWS IN BRIEF

Howard Brody’s latest book, *The Future of Bioethics*, was released by Oxford University Press at the end of January. He was invited to give two Alpha Omega Alpha (the national medical honor society) lectures, the first at Boonshoft School of Medicine, Wright State University, in Dayton, Ohio, on April 7 and at Texas A&M/Scott & White, in Temple, on April 21. Brody also lectured on “Narrative Bioethics: Moral Implications of Medical Narratives,” Humanism and the Healing Arts, Summa Health System, in Akron, Ohio, on May 8.



Laura Hermer’s recent activities included an invited presentation, “Tracking Local Ordinances: The Texas Web-Based System”, at the Smoke-Free Texas Legislative Workshop in Austin in January 2009. In April, she presented “Indigent Care and the New Administration’s

Health Care Reform Plan” at UTMB’s 2009 Homecoming. In May, she will lecture on issues in the privatization of Medicaid at the annual Law and Society meeting in Denver, Colorado, and then again a week later at the Health Law Professors’ Conference in Cleveland, Ohio. In January 2009, “Changes in Population Coverage by Texas Smoke-Free Ordinances: 2000-2007,” which Hermer co-authored with Phyllis Gingiss, Melynda Boern and Phillip Huang, was published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.



Michele Carter, with Susan Night, had an article, “From Strangers to Partners: Emerging Forms of Research Ethics Consultation,” published in the *American Journal of Bioethics*. Carter was also named an NIH Reviewer for project applications in Research Integrity. Michele Carter and Dana Bjarnason have been named as Guest Editors of the Special Issue on Ethical and Legal Issues of the *Nursing Clinics of North America*.