



MARCH is ETHICS AWARENESS MONTH!

All of the following news stories are taken from recent headlines and have interesting ethical aspects.

Please enjoy Week 1.

The Clinical Ethics Center at Memorial Medical Center was established in 1995 in cooperation with the Department of Medical Humanities of Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. Located in the B145 area, the Center's staff are available for ethics consultations Monday – Saturday and are on-call after hours for emergencies.

Octomom: In January, a 33 year-old unemployed California woman gave birth to the nation's second set of living octuplets (eight babies). Nadya Suleman has said all of her children, including her other six children ranging in age from 2 to 7, were born through in-vitro fertilization paid for out of her disability payments. Despite now having 14 children under the age of 7, the woman, who is unmarried and lives with her mother in a modest 3-bedroom home, says she plans to return to college in the fall to complete a Master's degree. The case has provoked national outrage and Suleman's publicist recently quit amongst death threats.

No Means No? Sheriff's officers in Washington have arrested an 82-year-old man after his wife died on the floor of their home, apparently about 10 weeks after she fell out of bed and was unable to get up. The man said that his wife of 52 years fell out of bed and told him not to summon help. After that, he left her lying on her left side on the floor, bringing her food and water, giving her medications and cleaning her, saying he thought she would eventually get up on her own.

Doobie-ous Club: A Springfield, IL man's "medical marijuana club" was raided less than 14 hours after he announced the club to the news media. Springfield police raided a home in the 1100 block of North Third Street and charged the man in connection with growing several marijuana plants inside the house. The man claimed he believed the operation, which opened two days earlier, was legal. "You pay your membership fees, and the marijuana is actually free," the man said. "I don't charge for the marijuana at all. It's medicine."

Say Cheese: The next time you go for a CT scan, you might want to bring a Polaroid. That's the conclusion of a small new study that finds that radiologists may look harder for cancer if they see a photo of the patient whose scans they're reviewing. In the study, 15 radiologists reviewed CT scans from 318 patients who agreed to be photographed. The radiologists noticed incidental findings in 81 scans. Three months later, the doctors were asked to review the same scans, without photos. This time, doctors missed 80% of the incidental findings.

Later Excommunicated: A 9-year-old Brazilian girl who was carrying twins after being raped by her stepfather underwent an abortion in early March despite complaints from Brazil's Roman Catholic church. Abortion is illegal in Brazil, but judges can make exceptions if the mother's life is in danger or the fetus has no chance of survival. The director of the public university hospital said "her uterus doesn't have the ability to hold one, let alone two children," but a lawyer for the Catholic Archdiocese said the girl should have carried the twins to term and had a Caesarean section.

Doctors Decree: The anonymous comment on the Web site RateMDs.com was unsparing: "Very unhelpful, arrogant," it said of a doctor. Such reviews are becoming more common as consumer ratings services like Zagat's and Angie's List expand beyond restaurants and plumbers to medical care, and some doctors are fighting back. They're asking patients to agree to sign a standardized waiver that bars patients from posting negative comments online. One neurosurgeon said such postings say nothing about a doctor's medical skills — and privacy laws and medical ethics leave doctors powerless to do anything about negative comments.

Free to Choose: As of March 5th, terminally ill patients in Washington State can invoke a new assisted suicide law called the Death with Dignity Act which allows them to ask for a lethal prescription from their doctor. Washington's new law is based on one introduced in Oregon ten years ago, where around 400 Oregon residents have used it. Like the Oregon act, Washington's law requires the patient to be a resident of the state, be at least 18 years old, be declared mentally competent, and two doctors have to certify he or she has six months or less to live.

Restroom Ransom: Is a toilet an optional extra when you're at 30,000 feet? No-frills carrier Ryanair announced it was thinking of charging customers to use the aircraft bathroom. "Passengers using train and bus stations are already accustomed to paying to use the toilet, so why not on airplanes?" Politicians and analysts agreed that the company who pioneered charging airline customers to check bags, to use a check-in desk, and even to use a credit or debit card to make an on-line booking ... might be serious about mile-high toilet extortion, too.

Justice for Sale: In a shocking case of courtroom corruption, two Pennsylvania judges have been charged with taking 2.6 million dollars in kickbacks to send teenagers to two privately run youth detention centers. Among the offenders were teenagers locked up for months for stealing loose change from cars, writing a prank note and possessing drug paraphernalia. Many appeared without lawyers, had never been in trouble before, and were imprisoned even after probation officers recommended against it. The high court, meanwhile, is looking into whether hundreds or even thousands of sentences should be overturned and the juveniles' records expunged.

Nitpicky: For generations, children with signs of head lice were summarily sent home by the school nurse. Today, a majority of schools across the country are allowing youngsters to stay in class if they have nits — that is, lice eggs — but no crawling lice in their hair. It's a change recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of School Nurses, and it has been welcomed by many educators and parents. However some parents want to see schools go back to taking a hard line against head lice.

Kids Having Kids: In 2006 the teen birth rate for the nation as a whole increased for the first time in 15 years according to a report by the CDC. The data show teen birth rates were highest in the South and Southwest, with the highest rates per 1000 women recorded in Mississippi (68.4), New Mexico (64.1) and Texas (63.1). The only states with a decrease in teen birth rates in 2006 were North Dakota, Rhode Island, and New York.

Shocking: In February, the FDA approved use of an implanted brain device for patients with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). "This is essentially like a pacemaker for the brain," neurosurgeon Hooman Azmi, MD, tells WebMD. The FDA's "humanitarian device exemption" permits use of the device on only the most severely ill people with OCD. Fewer than 4,000 patients have such drastic, treatment-resistant OCD. There is also serious risk. The decision is based on a clinical study of 26 patients at three U.S. medical centers - eleven of the 26 patients suffered a total of 23 serious adverse events.

Can You Hear Me Now? A patient awaiting eye surgery was startled when the surgeon answered his cell phone in the operating room and began discussing a previous operation, Australia's Northern Territory News reported. Apparently there were complications with the previous surgery, which were not the surgeon's fault, but had led to a rare complication. The patient who was awaiting eye surgery was still conscious and so upset by his doctor's bedside manner, that he told the surgeon he "would rather go blind." He then left the operating room and fled the building.

Illegal Activity: An Arizona man who has waged a 10-year campaign to stop a flood of illegal immigrants from crossing his property is being sued by 16 Mexican nationals — seeking \$32 million in damages — who accuse him of conspiring to violate their civil rights when he stopped them at gunpoint on his ranch on the U.S.-Mexico border. The rancher, Roger Barnett, 64, began rounding up illegal immigrants in 1998 and turning them over to the U.S. Border Patrol after they destroyed his property, killed his calves and broke into his home.

Male Queen? George Mason University students have elected a drag queen as homecoming queen. Student Ryan Allen beat out two women for the title at the small school in suburban Washington, D.C., famous for its run to the Final Four a few years back. Allen competed under his drag queen persona of Reann Ballslee. Allen, who is gay and performs in drag at nightclubs, said he entered as a joke. But he considers the victory one of his happiest moments and proof the school celebrates its diverse student body.

Free Flu Plan: The World Health Organization said Tuesday that a deal with U.S. drug maker Schering-Plough Corp. will allow it to provide poor countries with improved vaccine-making technology to prepare for a possible flu pandemic. WHO will license the technology free of charge to countries who take part in a U.N. action plan to stop a global outbreak of the deadly H5N1 flu strain. A recent study found that if an H5N1 pandemic outbreak occurred today, manufacturers would likely need four years to meet global demand for a vaccine.

Long Lines: Another study is poking holes in conventional wisdom. Turns out, uninsured people are not driving overcrowding at emergency rooms according to a study in JAMA. In fact, the study says, uninsured patients are less likely to visit the ER for non-urgent care than insured patients. And insured patients are fueling most of the rise in visits to the ER. Policymakers looking to relieve overcrowding in the ER should consider ways other than creating barriers to the uninsured, since they aren't a large part of the problem, the researchers conclude.

Half or Whole? Researchers now report beauty is in the brain of the beholder. Men process beauty on the right side of their brains, while women use their whole brain to do the job. The answer seems to be that when women consider a visual object they link it to language while men concentrate on the spatial aspects of the object. Although the lead researcher said "It is well known that there are differences between brain activity in women and men in cognitive tasks," researchers were surprised to find the same in the appreciation of beauty.