



MARCH is ETHICS AWARENESS MONTH!

*All of the following news stories are taken from recent headlines and have interesting ethical aspects.
Please enjoy Week 2.*

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.

Costanza Controversy: In what may be the first study inspired by an episode of "Seinfeld," Clemson University researchers have investigated whether germs transfer from mouth to chip to dip, also known as double dipping. The results, to be published later this year in the *Journal of Food Safety*, found that on average, three to six double dips transferred about 10,000 bacteria from the eater's mouth to the remaining dip. That means that sporadic double dipping would transfer at least 50 to 100 bacteria from one mouth to another with every bite.

Water on Drugs: A five-month-long Associated Press investigation published this week found that drugs — mostly the residue of medications taken by people, excreted and flushed down the toilet — have gotten into the drinking water supplies of at least 24 major metropolitan areas. In New York City, trace concentrations of heart medicine, infection fighters, estrogen, anti-convulsants, a mood stabilizer and a tranquilizer have been detected. In reaction to the story, the governor of Illinois ordered the state's environmental agency to begin screening waterways for pharmaceuticals and to promote safer disposal of medicines.

Another Day, Another Dollar: Preventing obesity and smoking can save lives, but it doesn't save money, researchers reported in February. It costs more to care for healthy people who live years longer, according to a Dutch study that counters the common perception that preventing obesity would save governments millions of dollars. The researchers found that from age 20 to 56, obese people racked up the most expensive health costs. But because both the smokers and the obese people died sooner than the healthy group, it cost less to treat them in the long run.

Ouch! Scientists in Germany say that tattoos could be the ideal way of delivering vaccines into the body because the rapidly vibrating tattoo needle causes greater damage to the body, provoking an immune system response. In studies with mice, tattooing a vaccine produced 16 times more antibodies than a simple injection into muscle tissue. The level of antibodies indicates the strength of the immune system's response. The scientists say the tattoo needles would never be suitable for preventative vaccines, but there may be a role in the routine vaccination of animals.

The Cheesiest? Kraft Foods, the conglomerate built on macaroni and cheese, is working on a new and unusual product line — food that is not only tasty, but kills intestinal worms. It is not intended for sale in the United States, but is aimed at rural Asia, Africa and Latin America, where worms leave millions of children lethargic and dangerously anemic. The food is in the early development stage, and a spokeswoman said the company was not ready to say whether it would be a cheese, a pasta, a granola bar or something else.

1 in 4 Infected: The U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in March that more than one in four U.S. teen girls is infected with at least one sexually transmitted disease. An estimated 26% of U.S. girls ages 14 and 19 have a sexually transmitted infection such as the human papillomavirus or HPV, chlamydia, genital herpes or trichomoniasis. The CDC said the report, released at a meeting in Chicago, was the first to gauge combined rates of common STDs in female adolescents, giving the best data to date.

Knowledge Gap: A survey of teachers at 201 Illinois schools suggests a sizable minority of sex education teachers do not cover all of the basics, and many lack training to teach sex ed at all. Researchers found that one-third of teachers did not give comprehensive instruction — defined as covering the four basic topics of abstinence, birth control, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. The findings suggest that doctors caring for teenagers may need to "fill gaps" in their knowledge of sexual health, according to the lead researcher at the University of Chicago.

Defined Eyes: On Jan. 1 a state law banning mercury from mascara and eye liners took effect in Minnesota as part of a larger ban targeting known sources of mercury, such as thermostats, barometers, industrial switches and medical devices. The law also covers toiletries, fragrances and over-the-counter drugs such as eye drops, nasal sprays, hemorrhoid treatments and antiseptics. Using eye makeup with mercury is unlikely to cause immediate health problems, but mercury accumulates in the body, so consumers should avoid exposure whenever possible said a toxicologist with the state Health Department.

The Best Defense? A court in Sicily has ruled that accused Mafioso Salvatore Ferranti, who weighs 462 pounds, can be put under house arrest because he is too heavy for any Italian jail. Guards said they constantly needed to help Ferranti, 36, get dressed and undressed, move about and go to the bathroom. They also said there was no bed big enough for him, that he could not get through the bathroom door, and that they would be at a loss if he had to be taken to a hospital in an emergency.

Attention all shoppers: taking the stairs protects your heart. That's the message researchers tried at a suburban shopping mall by putting up colorful signs along the steps of a staircase, and it worked. Over six weeks, use of the stairway next to an escalator more than doubled. With fewer daily opportunities for physical activity in modern society, public health officials are increasingly focusing on stairs at schools, workplaces, and even the mall. Past studies have also shown that the decision to take stairs can be manipulated relatively easily with a few signs.

Flu Day: On March 12, Hong Kong's government ordered that all kindergartens and primary schools be closed for two weeks amid a flu outbreak, shutting down classes for more than a half million students. Health secretary York Chow said the administration has seen a growing number of people suffering from the flu, adding that bringing the Easter break forward will help reduce cross infection among school children and calm public fears.

Hip-Hop Seizures: Now that surgeons have operated on Stacey Gayle's brain, her favorite hip-hop musician no longer triggers grand mal seizures. Four years after being diagnosed with epilepsy, Gayle recently underwent brain surgery at Long Island Jewish Medical Center to cure a rare condition known as musicogenic epilepsy. "Being that the seizures could be triggered by the music, this was a very interesting opportunity to study Stacey's brain," said Dr. Ashesh Mehta, the hospital's director of epilepsy surgery.

Heart Sounds: Congress has been asking questions for a month now about what Robert Jarvik is doing endorsing Lipitor. Jarvik was guaranteed \$1.35 million for the ads, which promote Pfizer's megablockbuster cholesterol drug. Jarvik is an M.D. who invented an artificial heart, but Jarvik has never practiced medicine and isn't licensed to do so. Also, the commercials appear to show Jarvik rowing — but it's actually a stunt double at the oars. "He's about as much an outdoorsman as Woody Allen," said one of Jarvik's colleagues.

Dignity Down: Earlier this year, Pope Benedict said that embryonic stem cell research, artificial insemination and the prospect of human cloning had "shattered" human dignity. In an address to members of the Vatican, Benedict said the Church had a duty to defend the "great values at stake" in the field of bioethics. The speech was the latest in a series in which the conservative Pope has told his listeners that scientific progress should not be accepted uncritically. Benedict said the Church was not against scientific progress but wanted it based on "ethical-moral principles".

In Need of Gerber: For the first time, officials report that the AIDS virus can be spread by a mother pre-chewing her infant's food. Health officials believe chewed-food transmission is rare in the United States, where such behavior is considered unusual. In some countries, mothers do it because they have no access to baby food or a means of pulverizing food for toothless infants. CDC officials say more study is needed, but they are asking parents and caregivers with HIV not to pre-chew infants' food, and are trying to educate doctors about this kind of transmission.

Mud Pies: The Associated Press reports that with food prices rising, Haiti's poorest can't afford even a daily plate of rice, and some must take desperate measures to fill their bellies. Some people have come to rely on a traditional Haitian remedy for hunger pangs: cookies made of dirt, salt, and vegetable shortening eaten as a regular meal. Global price hikes in oil, together with floods and crop damage from the 2007 hurricane season, have prompted the UN Food and Agriculture Agency to declare states of emergency in Haiti and several other Caribbean countries.

Polio Jab: As doctors struggle to eradicate the highly infectious disease polio worldwide, one of their biggest problems is persuading parents to vaccinate their children. In Belgium, authorities are resorting to an extreme measure: prison sentences. Two sets of parents in Belgium were recently handed five-month prison terms for failing to vaccinate their children against polio. Each parent was also fined \$8,000. The polio vaccine is the only one required by Belgian law. Exceptions are granted only if parents can prove their children might have a bad physical reaction to the vaccine.

Human Infection: Scientists who study endangered great apes in Africa may be a mixed blessing—while they may scare off poachers, people also carry with them dangerous diseases, a new study says. The research found that recent respiratory disease outbreaks among chimpanzee and gorilla populations came from great-ape researchers and ecotourists. This is not the first time that our germs have damaged ecosystems. Gorillas have died from scabies-mite infections, most probably contracted by handling human clothing, and Asian elephant populations of Nepal are suffering as their numbers dwindle from human tuberculosis.

Firing Range: Brain scans of people in chronic pain show a state of constant activity in areas that should be at rest, U.S. researchers said in February, a finding that could help explain why pain patients have higher rates of depression, anxiety and other disorders. Recent studies have shown that in healthy people, certain regions of the brain have a resting state, but in people with chronic pain a front region of the cortex mostly associated with emotion is constantly active, altering the way people process information that is unrelated to pain.