



MARCH is ETHICS AWARENESS MONTH!

All of the following are recent news headlines that have interesting ethical aspects. Please enjoy Week 3. 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 and are on-call after hours for emergencies. Please enjoy Week 3 and remember to visit the Advance Directive display in the Capital (E) Lobby March 24-31 to enter to win a basket filled with Ethical gifts.

Saving Face: The world's first face transplant recipient is using her new lips to take up smoking again, which doctors fear could interfere with her healing and raise the risk of tissue rejection. The 38-year-old Frenchwoman received a new nose, chin and lips from a brain-dead donor after being mauled by her dog last spring. Several surgeons groups have said that no such transplants should be done unless surgeons first make sure patients are psychologically healthy and prepared to take anti-rejection drugs and other measures for the rest of their lives.

Till Death Do Us Part: The illness, hospitalization and death of one partner can harm the well-being of the other, says a *New England Journal of Medicine* study. A nine-year study of 518,240 elderly couples found one partner dying or going into hospital raised the risk of the other dying within 30 days. A husband's death risk rose 53% within 30 days of a wife dying, while a wife's mortality risk rose 61%.

Blind Leading the Blind: About 30 students at two Chicago high schools with programs for the visually impaired and blind recently formed an advocacy group to change school policies that require them to pass a driver's ed class in order to graduate. The students must pass a written rules-of-the-road exam. Hundreds of school districts in Illinois require students to pass driver's ed, although the state only requires that districts offer the courses. A Chicago Public Schools official said the district would be open to waiving the requirement for blind students.

Nothing Says I Love You Like... a box of candy, a bouquet of roses — and matching noses. China's obsession with plastic surgery is finding fresh demand from couples who are going under the knife to get their noses and even their eyes done as a sign of their love for one another, the official newspaper China Daily reported. "I suggested it as a way of celebrating our relationship and bringing us closer together with a special kind of bond," said one young woman.

Age Just a Number? A 62-year-old great-grandmother has become one of the oldest women in the world to successfully give birth. The healthy six-pound, nine-ounce baby boy is the 12th child born to Janise Wulf, who also has 20 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Her oldest child is 40. Family members said Friday's delivery went smoothly, despite health concerns involving Wulf, who has diabetes and has been blind since birth. Baby Adam is the second child born to Wulf and third husband, Scott. Their other son is 3-1/2.

The Color of Blood: An extremely controversial policy in AIDS-ravaged South Africa that barred many blacks from donating blood led to a substantial drop in HIV-tainted blood supplies, a study has found. "Hundreds or more would have gotten infected from blood transfusions" without the race-based policy, said senior author Dr. Michael Busch of the Blood Systems Research Institute in San Francisco. Even so, Busch said that's not an argument in favor of the discriminating policy. Rather, it underscores "the dilemma of trying to maintain a safe blood supply in the challenging arena of epidemic infectious disease and social expectations."

Bug Wars: The number of deaths linked to the deadly superbug MRSA, a bacteria resistant to certain antibiotics, rose by nearly 25% between 2003 and 2004 in England and Wales, adding to fears over the spread of the infection. Michael Summers, chairman of the Patients Association, said that he was disappointed with the new numbers particularly given the amount of effort expended in fighting the bug.

Sticky Situation: The Environmental Protection Agency has asked chemical companies to stop using a toxic substance in the making of Teflon-coated pans that has been linked in some studies to cancer, strokes and other health problems. Announcing the voluntary program, officials of the agency said that full compliance would lead to a 95 percent reduction of the substance, perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA by 2010. PFOA is in Teflon, but it is also found in fabrics, leather, automobile parts, wire insulation and microwave popcorn bags.

CASE STUDY (discussion on reverse) Doctors are excited about the prospect of Avastin, a drug already widely used for colon cancer, as a crucial new treatment for breast and lung cancer, too. But doctors are cringing at the price the maker, Genentech, plans to charge for it: about \$100,000 a year. That price would raise Avastin to an annual cost typically found only for medicines used to treat rare diseases that affect small numbers of patients. But Avastin, already a billion-dollar drug, has a potential patient pool of hundreds of thousands of people — and expected sales of \$7 billion.

Smallpox Drill: Last week Cabinet officials gathered at the White House complex for a drill simulating a smallpox attack against the United States. The four-hour exercise was conducted to test the government's response plans. The World Health Organization reported smallpox was eradicated in 1980, but there are fears that it could be used by terrorists as a biological weapon. Federal officials said that a similar rehearsal in December for pandemic flu showed that saving lives and containing economic damage would require more planning in local communities and increased production of vaccines and medications.

Temper, Temper: Researchers studying more than 2,000 patients treated in an emergency room for broken bones, cuts and other traumas have found that those suffering bouts of anger were up to 8 times more likely to suffer an injury. For men, being "extremely" angry raised the risk of injury more than 7-fold, but even moderate levels of anger and hostility were linked to greater injury risk. Among women, only extreme anger and hostility raised the risk of injury, and to a lesser degree than that found for men.

This Woman Never Forgets: James McGaugh, one of the world's leading experts on how the human memory system works, admits he's stumped by a woman who has an astonishing ability to clearly remember even trivial events that happened decades ago. Give her any date and she can recall the day of the week, what the weather was like on that day, personal details of her life at that time, and major news events that occurred on that date. Unlike most people with similar disorders, this rare woman manages a normal daily life.

Starving for Attention: The world will have 100 million extra hungry people by 2015, scientists said at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Despite great improvements in food availability in the 1960s and 1970s, these trends are reversing in many developing countries, they say. The United Nations' goal of halving hunger by 2015 looks unattainable without new technologies and greater financial investment, they add. Ten pre-school children die every minute from malnutrition and this number has not changed since the early 1980s despite global promises.

I'll Take my Purse: Amal Graafstra waves his hand in front of a locked door, and it opens. His girlfriend, Jennifer Tomblin, places her hand inches from her computer, and she is instantly signed on. They have voluntarily implanted programmable microchips into their hands. "I did it because I don't want to carry anything around," Graafstra said. "I really did this for convenience." Silicone chips have been safely implanted in pets and livestock for years, and human implantation is becoming more popular as a way to fast track through security or get into exclusive clubs.

Geriatric Jails: Incarcerated Americans are getting older, and a new study suggests that U.S. prisons are not prepared to meet the challenge of caring for older prisoners. The study in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society found that 69 percent of women aged 55+ reported that they had great difficulty performing at least one daily living activity in prison such as climbing onto a top bunk, hearing orders from correctional officers, standing in line to be counted, walking to the dining hall, or dropping to the floor rapidly when an alarm goes off.

Genetic Contamination: A coalition of farmers, consumers and environmental activists have sued the U.S. government over its approval of Monsanto's genetically modified alfalfa. Alfalfa is easily cross-pollinated by bees and wind so it can quickly contaminate conventionally grown alfalfa, ultimately forcing farmers to pay for Monsanto's patented gene technology whether they want the technology or not. If they use the alfalfa, farmers could lose consumers who choose organic goods as well as export business because major importers of U.S. alfalfa have indicated they would avoid buying U.S. alfalfa once the genetically engineered variety is released.

Ladies First? Most individuals are not interested in choosing the sex of their child if given the opportunity, according to the results of a new nationwide survey in Fertility and Sterility. Sex selection is currently available through invasive and expensive in-vitro fertilization techniques; however, another easier and more affordable technology using sperm selection may soon be marketed in the US. The technique has triggered fears that sex selection may disrupt the natural sex ratio and could lead to gender stereotyping and discrimination.

CASE STUDY DISCUSSION:

Until now, drug makers have typically defended high prices by noting the cost of developing new medicines. But executives at Genentech and its majority owner, Roche, are now using a separate argument — citing the inherent value of life-sustaining therapies. If society wants the benefits, they say, it must be ready to spend more for treatments like Avastin. "Avastin is a superb drug, but its cost is already discouraging patients and doctors from using it," said Dr. David Johnson, who heads the cancer unit at Vanderbilt University and is a former president of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. "I wish it were one-tenth the cost, and if it were I would be giving it to almost everybody." Even some patients with insurance are thinking hard before agreeing to treatment, because out-of-pocket co-payments for the drug could easily run \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year. Although a year of Avastin treatment for colon cancer costs about \$50,000, the drug will be used at higher doses for lung and breast cancer. Genentech does not plan to reduce the unit price, even though the additional cost of producing a higher dose is minimal. Because Genentech is a leading developer of cancer therapies, some doctors also fear that the company's pricing plans for Avastin — around \$8,800 a month — may encourage other companies to charge more for their own oncology drugs. That could potentially drive up the overall cost of cancer treatment to unsustainable levels, they say. **What do you think?**