



MARCH is ETHICS AWARENESS MONTH!

All of the following news stories are taken from recent headlines and 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 Monday – Saturday and are on-call after hours for emergencies.

Wiihabilitation: Nintendo's Wii video game system, whose popularity already extends beyond the teen gaming set, is fast becoming a craze in rehab therapy for patients recovering from strokes, broken bones, surgery and even combat injuries. The usual stretching and lifting exercises that help the sick or injured regain strength can be painful, repetitive and downright boring. Using the console's unique, motion-sensitive controller, Wii games require body movements similar to traditional therapy exercises but patients become so engrossed mentally they're almost oblivious to the rigor.

Powering Down: The Nebraska Supreme Court ruled in February that electrocution is cruel and unusual punishment, outlawing the electric chair in the only state that still used it as its sole means of execution. In the landmark ruling, the court said the state Legislature may vote to have a death penalty, just not one that offends rights under the state constitution. The evidence shows that electrocution inflicts "intense pain and agonizing suffering," it said. "Condemned prisoners must not be tortured to death, regardless of their crimes," Judge William Connolly wrote in the 6-1 opinion.

Medical Errors: Medical residents who are depressed are about six times more likely to make medication errors than those who aren't depressed, says a study that looked at pediatric residents at three children's hospitals in the US. Researchers found that 20 percent of the residents were depressed, and 74 percent were burned out. During the study period, the residents made 45 medication errors, and those who were depressed made 6.2 times more medication errors than those who weren't depressed. There didn't appear to be a link between medication error rates and burnout.

GoGo Gadget: Talk about multitasking. US and Canadian scientists have devised a new energy-capturing knee brace that can generate enough electricity to power a cellphone or any portable device that can run on a modest amount of juice, according to new study. The brace harvests the energy lost when a human brakes the knee after swinging the leg forward to take a step in much the same way that a hybrid-electric cars recycles power from braking. One minute of walking would provide 10 minutes of talk time on a cellphone.

Second Amendment: Even before a gunman killed six people and injured more than a dozen others at Northern Illinois University, a small but growing movement had been underway at universities and state legislatures to allow students, faculty and staff to carry guns on campus. Twelve states are considering bills that would allow people with concealed-weapons permits to carry guns at public universities. The efforts were sparked by the Virginia Tech massacre last April. "The only way to stop a person with a gun is another person with a gun," says one student.

Password Protection: When Sebastien Boucher stopped at the U.S.-Canadian border, agents who inspected his laptop said they found files containing child pornography. But when they tried to examine the images after his arrest, authorities were stymied by a password-protected encryption program. Now Boucher is caught in a cyber-age quandary: The government wants him to give up the password, but doing so could violate his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination by revealing the contents of the files. Experts say the case could have broad computer privacy implications for people with computers, PDAs and other devices.

Boy oh Boy: Giving birth to a boy can increase the likelihood of severe postnatal depression, a new study suggests. Postnatal depression is common among new mothers - one study found a third of those taking part were affected to some degree. Although mothers of girl babies were more likely to have mild postnatal depression, among the women diagnosed with severe postnatal depression, 76% had had male babies. The Journal of Clinical Nursing study suggested earlier poor relationships with men could be a factor for some.

Animals Rejoice: An ambitious program by a coalition of government agencies could lead to the end of animal testing to evaluate the safety of new chemicals and drugs. Three agencies — the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Toxicology Program and the National Institutes of Health — have signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" to begin developing the new methods. The agreement is a "milestone" says Martin Stephens of the Humane Society of the United States. "We believe this is the beginning of the end for animal testing. We think the (conversion) process will take about 10 years."

Kissing Cousins: Marrying a distant relative could mean a larger family, according to Icelandic researchers who studied their nation's genetic record. The *Science* journal study found third and fourth cousin couples had more children than those more distantly related. These cousins may be biologically more compatible, the specialist genetics firm deCODE concluded. However, there was no advantage in partnerships involving first cousins.

Need A Lift? A drug used to treat impotence could help Israeli fighter pilots operate at high altitude, the Israeli military's official magazine reported in its latest issue. It said a retired general plans to present to the air force the results of a study he conducted on Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, where he found that tadalafil, the active ingredient in Cialis tablets, improved breathing in a thin atmosphere. An army spokeswoman said that there were no plans to use any such drug.

Related to Brad Pitt: New research shows that people with blue eyes have a single, common ancestor. A team at the University of Copenhagen has tracked down a genetic mutation which took place 6-10,000 years ago and is the cause of the eye colour of all blue-eyed humans alive on the planet today. Researchers say they have all inherited the same switch at exactly the same spot in their DNA. Brown-eyed individuals, by contrast, have considerable individual variation in the area of their DNA that controls melanin production.

Dropped: After a story appeared in the LA Times in February, Blue Cross of California said it would stop sending letters to doctors asking them to help find patients who had failed to report pre-existing medical conditions to the insurance company. The company said it had been sending out the letters — which include a copy of the patient's insurance application — for years, and hadn't received any complaints. Insurers are allowed in some cases to terminate the policies of people who fail to disclose existing conditions when they apply for insurance.

Primary Failure: Fewer American doctors are focusing on primary care, but the decline is being covered by physicians from other countries. The research arm of Congress said in February that as of 2006 there were 22,146 American doctors and 15,565 international medical graduates in residency programs in the United States specializing in primary care. "We are increasingly dependent on international medical school graduates to meet our needs. Currently, one in four new physicians in the U.S. is an international medical graduate," said Senator Sanders.

Comparison Shopping: Try shopping the Internet for an MRI, strep throat test or even an annual physical exam and you'll run into roadblocks. A new Twin Cities company called Carol joins a new effort to transform the U.S. health care system by putting consumers in charge and letting the market do its work. The free site, which went live in January, generates revenue from health care providers who become "tenants" on the site. When a consumer sets up an appointment with a clinic or doctor on Carol.com, the provider pays the site a fee.

Tippling Point: Four sheriff's deputies in Florida have been suspended after purposely tipping a paralyzed man out of his wheelchair onto a jailhouse floor. Surveillance footage from Jan. 29 shows a deputy dumping Brian Sterner out of his wheelchair and searching him on the floor after a traffic violation. Sterner, said when he was taken into a booking room and told to stand up, the deputy grew agitated when he told her that he could not. Sterner can drive a car but has not been able to walk since a 1994 wrestling accident.

A Drop To Drink? Oceans cover more than 70% of the planet, and every single spot has been affected by people in some way. Researchers studying 17 different activities ranging from fishing to pollution compiled a new map showing how and where people have impacted the seas. The areas most affected include the North Sea, the South and East China Seas, Caribbean Sea, the east coast of North America, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Bering Sea and parts of the western Pacific, the study found. It said the least affected areas are near the poles.

Humanity: Nationwide, violence against the homeless is soaring, and overwhelmingly the attackers are teenagers and young adults. In Florida the problem is so severe that the National Coalition for the Homeless is setting up speakers bureaus to address a culture that sees attacking the homeless as a sport. It is the first time the organization has singled out a particular state. Agencies have teamed with the local schools to develop a curriculum for elementary, middle and high schools teaching respect for the homeless.

Lights Out: Women who live in neighborhoods with large amounts of nighttime illumination are more likely to get breast cancer than those who live in areas where nocturnal darkness prevails, according to an unusual study that overlaid satellite images of Earth onto cancer registries. The finding adds credence to the hypothesis that exposure to too much light at night can raise the risk of breast cancer by interfering with the brain's production of a tumor-suppressing hormone.

Double Trouble: In the complex, expensive and emotionally charged world of fertility treatment, doctors are sounding a call to reverse the soaring rate of multiple births. Since 1980, when in vitro fertilization became available in the US, the rate of twins in all births has climbed 70 percent. Much of the increase, experts say, is a result of in vitro treatment. The rate of triplets and higher-order multiples increased even more. It is not that twins or triplets are undesirable, doctors say, but multiple pregnancies often lead to risky preterm births and other complications.