



MARCH is ETHICS AWARENESS MONTH!

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

Please enjoy Week 4.

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.

New Flu Brew: It's time to write up the recipe for next year's flu vaccine. The flu vaccine must be reformulated every year to keep up with the fast-evolving influenza virus, and this year the government made a rare wrong bet on which strains would cause the most disease. In February, the FDA brought together flu specialists for the annual rite of predicting what strains are most likely to strike next winter. On the agenda: A complete overhaul, brewing next year's vaccine to protect against three strains not in this year's inoculation but that are circulating the globe now.

Gloves Are Off: Amid mounting concern about allergic reactions, Johns Hopkins Hospital has announced it is trying to virtually eliminate the rubber-based material called latex, but it's difficult because latex is found in so many products, including gloves, adhesive tapes, wheelchair tires, syringes, and rubber vial stoppers. A protein in latex has been shown to trigger allergic reactions in as many as one in 10 people. By some estimates, 15% of medical workers are allergic to latex. Severely allergic people can even react to getting injected with a syringe that has punctured a latex port on a medication vial.

Save Now, Pay Later: Newsweek reports a couple retiring this year will need about \$225,000 in savings to cover medical costs in retirement. This includes expenses associated with Medicare premium payments as well as co-payments and deductibles, plus out-of-pocket prescription drug costs. The Center for Retirement Research says given current levels of retirement savings, six in 10 older workers are "at risk" of being unable to maintain their standard of living in retirement.

Are You My Mommy? Research shows that as many as 44 percent of parents who used egg donors have no plans to tell their children the truth about their origins, a figure that surprises psychologists and fertility specialists who had expected a higher rate of disclosure at a time when openness is encouraged about such matters. Researchers studying adoption and sperm donation have found children kept in the dark about their origins often felt betrayed when they later learned the truth, and more so, if they discovered accidentally through a relative or family friend.

Sign Here: Studies show that most patients don't read the informed consent forms they sign before undergoing surgery or medical treatment. More than half of those who do read the forms don't understand them, and only a quarter of forms include all of the data patients need to make an informed decision. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services recently issued new guidelines calling on hospitals to design patient-friendly informed-consent processes that include describing treatment alternatives and the consequences of declining recommended therapies; hospitals that don't comply could lose their eligibility to bill Medicare for treatments.

Poachers: Rich countries are recruiting so many African health workers that the practice should be viewed as a crime, a team of international disease experts said in February. More than 13,000 doctors trained in Africa are now practicing in Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia, leaving behind colleagues struggling with impossible caseloads. They cited estimates showing Ghana had spent \$70 million training health professionals who then left to work in Britain, leaving behind coworkers to see up to 300 patients per day, and saving Britain \$130 million in training costs.

Caught Red-Handed: UCLA Medical Center will fire some employees and discipline others for snooping at the confidential medical records of Britney Spears, who was hospitalized in its psychiatric ward. The LA Times reported that the breaches occurred during Spears most recent hospital stay. While the disciplined employees were unable to access her psychiatric records, they did look at non-psychiatric records from her previous visits to the medical center. The newspaper said more than 13 employees would be fired. Twelve others, including several doctors, will be disciplined otherwise for looking at her computerized records.

Paying for Mistakes: Spurred by federal and industry moves to cut payments for avoidable mistakes, hospitals across the country have joined a growing movement not to charge patients for serious, preventable errors. Since last fall, hospitals in 11 states have agreed to waive fees for certain rare errors dubbed "never events" because safety experts say they should never happen at all. A national agency has identified 28 such events ranging from giving a mother the wrong baby to leaving objects behind after surgery. Still, that leaves 39 states where patients can expect to be billed for such errors.

Heart Signs: Only about 1 in 4 Americans know the warning signs of a heart attack and what to do first, according to a new government report. That's a decline in knowledge since the last survey in 2001, which showed nearly 1 in 3 to be well informed. Heart attack warning signs can include one or more of the following five symptoms: shortness of breath; pain or discomfort in the chest; discomfort in the arms or shoulder; a feeling of weakness or lightheadedness; and discomfort in the jaw, neck or back.

Don't Eat That: To the list of simple childhood pleasures whose safety has been questioned, add this: eating snow. A recent study found that snow - even in relatively pristine spots like Montana and the Yukon - contains large amounts of bacteria. But experts say there's no need to banish snow-eating along with dodgeball, unchaperoned trick-or-treating and riding a bike without a helmet. "It's a very ubiquitous bacteria that's everywhere," says Dr. Penelope Dennehy, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' committee on infectious diseases. "We eat bacteria all the time."

Lotto-Fever: Oregon is conducting a one-of-a-kind lottery, and the prize is health insurance. The state will start drawing names in March for the chance to enroll in a health care program designed for people not poor enough for Medicaid but too cash-strapped to buy their own insurance. More than 80,000 people have signed up since registration for the lottery opened in January, but only a few thousand will be chosen for the program. Those selected in the lottery will be eligible for a standard benefit program.

Pain of Mental Illness: According to reports, after a Kansas woman developed a phobia about leaving the bathroom of the house she shared with boyfriend, she took up residence in it. After two years, the boyfriend finally became concerned about his girlfriend's behavior, so he called in authorities. To their shock, they discovered that the woman had become physically attached to the toilet seat. The sheriff said the woman, appeared to have developed "bed sores" from sitting on the toilet seat and her skin had become attached and grown around the seat as it tried to heal.

Man's Best Friend? Dogs may have a hard time wrapping their paws around this one. A study by Saint Louis University found that a lovable pooch named Sparky and a robotic dog, AIBO, were about equally effective at relieving the loneliness of nursing home residents and fostering attachments. Those who visited with AIBO took a little longer to warm up to the metallic creature, but over time, they grew more comfortable, petting and talking to it. AIBO responded by wagging his tail, vocalizing and blinking his lights.

On With The Show: All the world's a stage at some of Minnesota's bars. A new state ban on smoking in restaurants and other nightspots contains an exception for performers in theatrical productions. So some bars are getting around the ban by printing up playbills, encouraging customers to come in costume, and pronouncing them "actors." The customers are playing right along, merrily puffing away - and sometimes speaking in funny accents and doing a little improvisation, too. The state Health Department is threatening to bring the curtain down on these sham productions.

Shin Bone Connected To...? For every foot, there's an ankle. Or not. In Texas, that all depends on a legal battle between medical doctors and podiatrists, who both claim the ankle as their turf. The debate has raged to the point that the two sides disagree in court on whether the ankle actually exists. A state appeals court recently sided with medical doctors when it determined that the state board that licenses podiatrists exceeded its authority in defining the ankle as part of the foot.

Girl Power: Across India, parents are aborting girls more often than at any time in history, resulting in a skewed national ratio of females to males. The women's and children's ministry recently announced the latest plan to reverse the trend. The premise: Pay a family to raise a girl. Give birth to a daughter, and the family gets cash. Vaccinate her, more cash. Send her to school, feed her, delay her marriage, cash payment for each step. The hope is the families will look upon the girl as an asset rather than a liability.

Stealing Hearts: New research shows a common new technology for monitoring defibrillators is vulnerable to hacking and even to reprogramming from outside sources. In the model studied, transmissions from the defibrillator to a bedside monitor that then sends the data to a doctor are not encrypted, which means that someone intercepting the transmissions could retrieve such data as the patient's birth date, medical ID number and Social Security number. The technology is spreading to more medical devices and researchers predict patients' data will face increasing risks.

More Comfortable: Terminally-ill patients in the Netherlands increasingly receive drugs to render them unconscious until death, according to a study that suggests people are substituting deep sedation for legal euthanasia. In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to legalize adult euthanasia. It has since been adopted by Belgium, and other European states are investigating allowing it. While euthanasia is regulated by law and carries strict conditions, deep sedation is considered part of regular medical practice and is typically used in the last few weeks in life.

Asleep On The Job: Hey you! Dozing at your desk! Wake up, go home and get more sleep! That could be the message from a survey released in March by the National Sleep Foundation. The survey of 1,000 people found participants average six hours and 40 minutes of sleep a night on weeknights, even though they estimated they'd need roughly another 40 minutes of sleep to be at their best. Roughly one-third of those surveyed said they had fallen asleep or become very sleepy at work in the past month.