

Medical Ethics and the Faith Factor: A Handbook for Clergy and Health-Care Professionals

Robert Orr, M.D., C.M.

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Reviewed by: Edmund Pellegrino

This is a handbook dedicated to assisting physicians, health professionals, and the general public—to all who must make ethical decisions associated with medical and health care. The author's expressed hope is "...to assist people of faith as they seek satisfactory resolution of difficult ethical dilemmas."

The first two parts of the book provide synopses of the ethical and theological foundations of the analyses of the cases he presents. These two introductory sections occupy 29 of the book's 483 pages, making this a casebook derived principally from the author's vast clinical and ethical experience. The author is more than amply qualified for the task he set himself. He has been a respected contributor to the field of Christian bioethics as a teacher, practitioner, and author for many years.

The author has chosen a wide variety of cases illustrating the major ethical challenges presented by serious illness in every major organ system of the body, as well as addressing issues of the neonatal period, children, pregnancy, reproductive technology, organ transplantation, and cultural and religious beliefs. Each case is presented in clear, reader-friendly language, and analyzed in an unusually orderly manner. Thus, each case is discussed under six headings: 1) posing a central question; 2) a case history; 3) a discussion of the issues; 4) the author's recommendations; 5) a follow-up of the clinical course; and 6) a closing comment. Crucial points are often printed in boldfaced type.

The author's opinions are personal and open to further discussion. They clearly reflect the author's long and broad experience as a compassionate, faith-inspired physician-ethicist. He often expresses his opinions informally in such terms as "ethically

appropriate,” “ethically problematic,” “morally obligatory,” “a morally valid decision,” “ethically troublesome,” etc.

The author’s faith commitment as a Protestant is set forth from the beginning. There is little formal argumentation, however. Reference to his particular Christian perspective is intermittent and more by indirection than formal argument. The book can be approached for its impressive clinical wisdom and responsible ethical analyses, as well as its faith-centered orientation.

This reviewer will make no attempt to subject the author’s case analyses or his ethical opinions to criticism. Many of his opinions would be congenial to this reviewer; others might not, particularly in the sections relating to pregnancy, reproductive technologies, or organ transplantation. These differences do not in any way depreciate the value of a volume dedicated to careful clinical and ethical analysis, one which could be read with profit by anyone interested in careful ethical reasoning.

A few suggestions for making this book more useful seem to be in order: 1) an index would make this case book more accessible as a ready reference for clinicians; and 2) a closer connection between a particular resolution and a particular case would assist in clarifying the author’s reasons for his recommendations. These reasons could advance his aim of assisting people of faith to appreciate the way the author’s faith commitment shapes his recommendations. This book will be valuable to clinicians as well as bioethicists. The combination of careful ethical analysis, and unusually orderly discussion, with a foundation in extensive clinical experience, should be a valuable reference for all who confront ethical issues in medical and health care.

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