

# Editorial: Blood Relations

Is it right to buy and sell blood? Even if your pool of blood came from unpaid volunteers, would it be right to give a transfusion to a pregnant Jehovah's Witness? Both questions have been canvassed in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, the journal of the Society for the Study of Medical Ethics, which was established in 1975. In its first eight volumes it has developed a face and a character and has enlisted a range of contributors to match the diversity of the dilemmas that they are called upon to discuss. A recent 'thematic review of past issues' has sections on abortion and sterilization, artificial insemination, clinical research, death and euthanasia, disputes in the health services, the doctor-patient relationship, drugs, medicine and society, organ transplantation, violence, and psychiatry, ethics and mental health.

The authors and the editorial board are not beset by the philosophical sin of being so preoccupied with polishing their spectacles that they forget to look through them at the real world; but they do rightly give some attention to questions of method and to the intricacies of the relations between the multifarious disciplines that they practise and invoke. The list of themes is completed by sections on 'medical ethics definitions and discussion' and 'teaching medical ethics'. The advertisement columns suggest that ophthalmology may be committed in some neighbouring places. A diploma course in the Philosophy of Medicine is offered by the Society of Apothecaries of London, and Reidel of Dordrecht are now publishing *Metamedicine: An International Journal for Philosophy and Methodology of Medicine*.

The editor of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Raanan Gillon, BA (Philosophy), MB, BS, MRCP, has been asking for 'more contributions from philosophers who are prepared to write in a style which is accessible to doctors and other non-philosophers'. If he finds them he will be adding to what is already a substantial stock. Professor D. W. Hamlyn is a consulting editor. Professor R. S. Downie and Professor G. R. Dunstan are members of the editorial board. Contributors have included Elizabeth Anscombe, Basil Mitchell, Roger Scruton, Antony Flew, John Harris, Elizabeth Telfer and Ronald Hepburn. Other disciplines and the general public are represented by H. J. Eysenck, Sir Martin Roth, Donald Coggan, Sir Dugald Baird, Sir Edmund Leach, Enoch Powell, Katharine Whitehorn, Ivan Illich, Ian Kennedy, Conor Cruise O'Brien, R. Y. Calne, Bernard Towers, Tam Dalyell and Lord Kilbrandon.

An editorial review of a Granada Television series makes some of the chief points about the risks and the responsibilities of the whole enterprise:

On three consecutive nights earlier this year Granada Television interrogated doctors and others on what they would do in various hypothetical morally complex situations. Lawyers, manifesting varying degrees of aggression, took turns at hoisting their quarries upon their own petards. Conflicting opinions were elicited, absolute claims were made and then undermined, muddy waters thoroughly stirred. We learned that some doctors would never betray a patient's confidence, no matter what the cost to society might be; that others would do so in exceptional circumstances; and that administrators might bypass the lot by showing hospital records to the police at their own discretion (the administrator who dropped this bombshell added that he would not even discuss the matter with the doctor concerned 'so as not to put him in an impossible situation').

Different opinions were obtained on consent to vasectomy in various complicated circumstances; on over-riding a patient's known aversion to ECT; and on sterilization of a sexually active mentally subnormal youth with a family history of Huntingdon's chorea!

The editor's comments are not all compressed into that exclamation mark. He judges that the series was good television but not good ethics. The programmes 'failed to allow time or latitude for proper discussion of *why* the doctors and others held their conflicting views and how, if at all, these views fitted within coherent networks of moral beliefs. Moral philosophy—which is what such discussion amounts to—is bound to be complex and cannot possibly be accommodated within the long question–short answer technique so beloved of lawyers, television producers and often, let it be said, doctors too.'

The editor's own journal deserves a less qualified welcome. The main articles, discussions and reviews combine the necessary complexity with the desirable clarity. Some of the other features—especially the case conferences and correspondence columns, with their carefully disguised identities—are reminiscent of Evelyn Home or even Peter Simple:

My particular interest was in the three papers on Transsexualism—a problem I have had to deal with as the spouse of a man for whom the dilemma of his transsexualism became increasingly overwhelming in the mid-sixties. We have since been divorced, correction surgery has been done, and she is now living comfortably in her new role. Our two children, now university students, are seemingly making a satisfactory adjustment—the problem of relating in a new way to a parent who is no longer a 'father' has been a challenge.

Professor Geach pointed out in one of his Stanton Lectures that it is no longer plausible to cite 'A father is a male parent' as a sentence expressing a necessarily true proposition. But perhaps we can be allowed to keep 'There is nobody who is a brother and is not male'.