



*A message from . . .*

*The President*

## ETHICS, MEDICINE AND SOCIETY

**I**N all the hubbub, clamor and furor of the current debate about "cost containment," one other concept of significance seems to be emerging and quite possibly changing. This is the broad concept called ethics. We are all aware of the impact of ethical considerations in our lives, but these generally have been somewhat esoteric, and have not received widespread publicity or public attention. Increasing demand for unlimited, high-quality medical care in the face of finite resources may force us all to re-examine our beliefs about these difficult concepts which eventually will confront us all, physicians or laymen alike.

Of course, physicians, since the dawn of time, have been subjected to different creeds of ethics developed for the benefit of the patient, from the Oath of Hippocrates down through the American Medical Association's Principles of Medical Ethics. Physicians are not unfamiliar with the problems involved in making the choices and decisions required in the care of our patients, but these choices and decisions now apparently are spreading to involve a broader segment of society. Ethical dilemmas such as appropriate care of an incompetent patient, possible rationing of medical care due to increasing demand and decreasing resources, or the advisability of withholding treatment in hopeless situations, increasingly are becoming more prominent and publicized. These ethical and moral decisions have been made by physicians from time immemorial but there seems to be a growing trend to extend this responsibility.

The question, it seems to me, is becoming who has the responsibility or obligation to make these decisions? In a recent study from California, it was estimated that approximately 20 per cent of the resources of a group of hospitals was expended to care for people whose prognosis was less than a year. In the Medicare program, around .5 per cent of the patients, those with end-stage renal disease, consume almost 10 per cent of the funds. Is it ethical to expend so much of society's resources on a limited number of people or on those with very

little chance of long-term survival? If so, why? And, if not, who is to make that decision? Is it ethical to deny expensive and potentially painful care to a baby born with severe birth defects, or is it more ethical to expend all of our energy, resources, and technology to prolong this life? Do we place a value in dollars and cents on an individual life? And, if so, who determines that value? Do ethical considerations come down in the end to a matter of money? If society as a whole pays the bill, who has the right to dictate to an individual what his or her choices must be?

These are indeed difficult questions. And for me, at least, the answers are not clear. In the practice of Medicine, however, in this day and age, there seems to be a requirement for answers to these possibly unanswerable questions. How do we approach this? Is it the duty of our elected officials to provide answers to these questions? If so, has the Legislature understood and accepted this awesome responsibility? Or, is it the province of the courts to make these determinations? Will our already overburdened legal system be able to respond to the split-second decisions that are sometimes required? Is it able to accept this responsibility in a timely fashion?

These are but a few of the many questions that arise when ethical considerations meet harsh economic realities. Attempting to answer these questions will challenge us to re-evaluate our own beliefs and behavior as well as those of others. I feel it is the responsibility of our profession, as on so many other occasions, again to take the lead in evaluating these questions and trying to resolve them. If we do not, we can rest assured others will.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harry Shannon M.D.".

HARRY SHANNON, M. D., *President*  
West Virginia State Medical Association