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Research

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only work in a lab; I only do research; I'm not into philosophy or ethics or politics. This is a matter of great social and human responsibility."

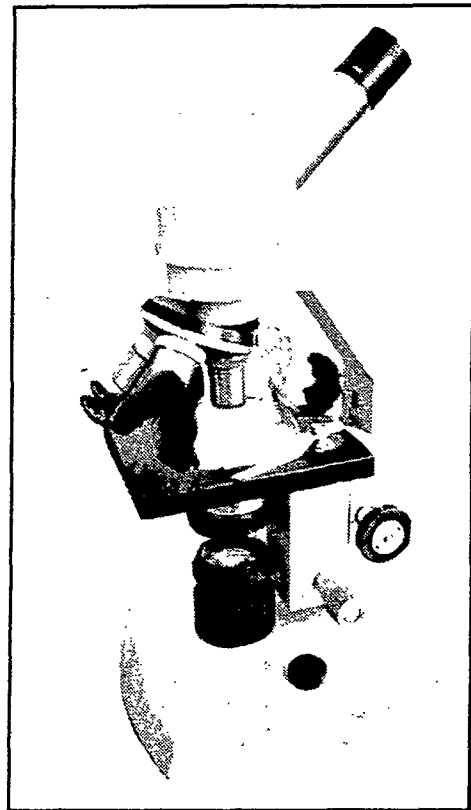
Indeed, the cardinal's statement enunciated the church's position that medical and scientific research are bound by the same moral laws that guide the rest of human activity. From zygotes to senior citizens, every individual's life is of far greater value than any knowledge to be gained by abusing it, the church's ethics experts have emphasized.

For example, Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) wrote extensively on medical ethics, in part, because he had been shocked by how Nazi researchers subjected imprisoned human subjects to various torturous studies, all in the name of scientific progress. In a Sept. 3, 1952, address, Pope Pius XII clearly placed the value of human life above the value of such progress.

"Science itself, then, along with its researches and attainments, must be inserted in the order of values," he said. "Here, well-defined frontiers present themselves, which even medical science cannot transgress without violating higher moral rules."

Those higher moral values are rooted in a respect for the individual, according to Father Kevin O'Rourke, OP, director of the Center for Health Care Ethics at St. Louis University in Missouri. However, researchers have not always held such respect, he noted in a telephone interview with the *Courier*.

For example, he said, the U.S. government sponsored research in Tuskegee, Ala., begun in the 1930s, in which several men were allowed to go un-



treated for syphilis. In May, President Bill Clinton formally apologized to victims of that study, which ended in 1972.

Father O'Rourke summed up the attitude of the Tuskegee researchers as: "We're getting great knowledge, even though we're abusing people."

Drawing the lines

Along with Father Benedict Ashley, OP, who also works at the center, Father O'Rourke has written *Health Care Ethics: A Theological Analysis*. First published in 1979, the book was updated this year.

The book's "Health Care Ethics" section on human experimentation outlines the benefits and dangers of such research from a Catholic view.

"Many beneficial vaccines and other therapies, such as smallpox and

poliomyelitis vaccines, open-heart surgery, and successful treatment of certain birth defects, could not have been developed without research with human subjects ...," Father O'Rourke wrote.

"At the same time, research on humans has also been abused," he continued, pointing to the Nazi and Tuskegee experiments as examples.

In 1994, the U.S. bishops issued a letter titled "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" that explicitly addressed the rights of those who may be subject to experimental research:

"No one should be the subject of medical or genetic experimentation, even if it is therapeutic, unless the person or surrogate first has given free and informed consent," the bishops wrote.

"In instances of nontherapeutic experimentation, the surrogate can give this consent only if the experiment entails no significant risk to the person's well-being," they continued.

"Moreover, the greater the person's incompetency and vulnerability, the greater the reasons must be to perform any medical experimentation, especially nontherapeutic," the bishops concluded.

According to the church, among the most vulnerable subjects are fetuses. Consequently, the church strongly opposes using the unborn for any nontherapeutic purpose. Such purposes would include harvesting aborted fetal brain tissue to transplant to patients with such diseases as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, according to Father Patrick Norris, OP, associate director of the ethics center at St. Louis.

"In using tissues from aborted fetuses, you're facilitating an ongoing evil," he said in a telephone interview.

Ethics experts acknowledged, however, that members of the medical and research communities disagree over the humanity of the unborn — and whether the unborn qualify for protection from researchers. But most researchers would agree with the bishops' positions on experimentation for all other subjects, the experts added.

For example, in its own research guidelines, the Chicago-based American Medical Association clearly spells out the need for informed consent by human subjects in research projects.

"To the extent that research is dependent upon the willingness of patients to accept a level of risk, their understanding of the potential harms involved must be a top priority of any clinical investigation," the AMA guidelines state.

Researchers should get a subject's written consent, said Dr. Bernard J. Ficarra, president of the Catholic Academy of Sciences, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

In a telephone interview, Ficarra, a retired surgeon and attorney, noted that whenever he did medical research, he always had subjects sign a statement outlining the experiment. The statement ended: "I read the above; I understand the above and I consent to it."

He added that consent documents should be witnessed and notarized, and that researchers should never use

subjects who are mentally incompetent.

In a telephone interview from his Indiana office, Father Richard A. McCormick, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame, also noted that researchers must be careful not to coerce potential subjects into participating in an experiment.

"I think you can have coercion in a variety of settings," he said, pointing to poverty or imprisonment as conditions that could possibly influence a subject's consent.

To prevent research abuses, the federal government won't fund research projects by institutions unless they have an "Institutional Review Board," Father O'Rourke wrote in *Health Care Ethics*. Such boards must approve research projects. Furthermore, the National Institutes of Health require that individuals receiving NIH training grants complete a course in research ethics, he said.

What about the animals?

Is it immoral to experiment on animals, an objection raised by various animal rights activists in recent years? Not from the Catholic Church's point of view — although the church has its limits.

"Medical and scientific experimentation on animals, if it remains within reasonable limits, is a morally acceptable practice since it contributes to caring for or saving human lives," states section 2417 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

However, the very next section, 2418, states: "It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly."

Father McCormick echoed the catechism's position.

"Unnecessary experimentation is considered to be cruelty to animals," he said.

Ficarra pointed out that he had used animals in his research for years, and that little, if any, pain needed to be inflicted on them.

"Animals are very beautiful," he said. "They're creatures of God, and we should not inflict pain on them."

Ficarra noted that some experimenters had used animals in a cruel manner, and he cited one case in which researchers deliberately crashed a car filled with monkeys who were killed as a result of the "accident." The researchers wanted to study broken bones and trauma, he said, but what they did was clearly immoral.

"Any experiment that causes pain in an animal is verboten," he said.

He added that if researchers find it necessary to do something that might create pain in an animal they should administer the proper pain-killers. He also said researchers should never permanently injure an animal or leave it in a coma.

Several ethics experts pointed out that the church has called on the research community to do all it can to lessen the use of animals in research. In certain instances, for example, researchers can use computer models to test their propositions instead of using animals, according to Father O'Rourke.

"If there's any other methods of proving theories, they should be used," he said.

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