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Waymack on Medical Ethics

Town Travis/Medill

Bioethics lecture questions the goals of modern medicine

BY TOWN TRAVIS
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In the changing world of medicine, bioethicist Mark Waymack said the medical community might have lost sight of the goals to promote health and prevent disease.

He looks to everything from cosmetic surgery to the corporate focus on profits in health care for shifting basic goals of medicine.

Waymack, co-director of the graduate program in health care ethics at Loyola University, speaks Thursday at Northwestern University's Medical Humanities and Bioethics lunchtime lecture series.

"We've gone from respirators and artificial feeding tubes to cloning and genetic engineering," Waymack said.

He talked last week on what medicine should be and who should decide. This week, he tackles the goals of medicine and how they have changed.

"With the pace of change in medical technology," he said, "medicine began to be able to do things and did them." Many people began to ask, "Is that really what we want to do? Is that really what we should do?" he said.

Waymack cited the Karen Ann Quinlan case as an example of the end of life debate, which helped bring medical ethics to the public's attention. Quinlan was a young woman who lived for months in a vegetative state in the 1970s, despite her parent's request that she be removed from life support.

Modern doctors are called upon to participate in a wide array of activities such as state sponsored executions, genetic engineering and cloning - all of which may not fall into the traditional sense of ethical medicine, he said.

"[Cosmetic surgery is] not treating any disease in an ancient old fashioned sense, but presumably is helping people feel better about themselves somehow," Waymack said.

A new ethical question has appeared recently, he added. "Cosmetic neurology [means] giving students Adderall or Ritalin to help them think better, memorize better, [help] with their final exams and stay focused better to do their final papers," he said.

Some surveys show that "perhaps as many as 20 percent of university students use these drugs. We also have drugs -- pharmaceuticals -- for shyness, anxiety. So if you want to be a more outgoing person, medicine technologically can help with this," he said.

"It's sort of a Frankenstein question," Waymack said. "Are those things that doctors should be doing?"

Health consumers (a word Waymack intentionally uses rather than "patients") should consider if their health insurance dollars should be spent on procedures such as liposuction. "Should your health insurance dollars pay, not simply for you to get them, but -- with the way insurance works -- should those dollars pay for other people to get that kind of treatment?"

Medical norms change constantly, he said. For example, women were once discouraged from using painkillers during childbirth. At the time, it was thought that there existed a biblical directive for women to suffer while giving birth. The norms on that issue varied over the years, ranging from times when women were encouraged to be completely sedated, to modern day views that allow women to do what they want.

Medical ethics is a relatively new field, said Waymack, existing in the modern form since the 1970s, although the field of medicine has always inspired ethical dilemmas.

Waymack also teaches at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

Waymack's Thursday lecture on "Ethics and the Goals of Medicine: Rhetoric versus Rationality" starts at noon in the Searle Seminar Room on the first floor of the Robert H. Lurie Medical Research Center, at 303 E. Superior St. The free lecture is open to the public and attendees can bring a lunch. For more information, contact Brian Morrison at 312-503-1927.



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Mark Waymack, professor of philosophy and bioethics, talks about the ethics of medicine at Northwestern University's Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program lecture series.

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