Human Experimentation and Medical Ethics


This volume is unfortunately topical and members of the UK Medicines Commission currently considering new guidelines for human volunteer experiments could find it a useful primer. Within the recent past two students have died in the British Isles as a consequence of their participation in volunteer drug studies. The lessons to be drawn from these two tragedies are still not clear. However, they are certainly not those intemperately expressed by the leader writer of the (London) Times who suggested that only pharmaceutical company employees should take part in drug studies. The whole issue of human volunteers is a complex one which this collection of papers explores in some detail. Particularly interesting are the papers which deal with fact rather than opinion and I single out for mention the chapter by N Howard Jones on historical perspectives on human experimentation.

Our forebears had a more robust attitude to adequate motivation of research subjects. The condemned Newgate prisoners who volunteered for experimental variolation in 1721 in return for their liberty (if they survived) probably had few second thoughts. Fascinating also is the account of 'auto-experiments' popular with physicians in the 19th century. These feats of daring are still in vogue in many physiological laboratories. A short history of drug disasters in the 20th century makes interesting reading since most of these large-scale disasters were caused by too little experimentation rather than too much. Dr Howard Jones quotes the US elixir scandal of 1937 in which an untested diethylnylglycol solution of sulphathiamide was marketed, killed over one hundred patients, and lead to the establishment of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, he omits to mention that twenty years later a very similar large scale disaster occurred in France when 'Stalinon', an untested organic tin compound, was marketed for treatment of furunculosis.

It is inevitable that disasters and tragedies focus attention on human experimentation more clearly than abstract debates on the moral issues of informed consent. If medical research is to continue productive, human experimentation will have to continue and probably expand. If armchair theoreticians react by tedious and restrictive regulations of such experimentation, then no real benefit will result. Let us hope that common sense on such issues as risk and benefit, incentive and compensation, will prevail and that the principles elaborated in this consensus volume will be incorporated into a working arrangement.

PETER J LEWIS
Vice-President and Director
Merrell Dow Research Institute, Strasbourg Center, Strasbourg, France

Making Babies: The Test Tube and Christian Ethics

Editors, Alan Nichols and Trevor Hogan, 116 pages, Canberra $A7.95
Acorn Press, 1984

In Australia theology is taken seriously. A report of the Commonwealth's National Health and Medical Research Council, published in 1983, recommending the setting-up of a National Research Ethics Committee, lists theology among the disciplines to be represented on it. This is despite the...