Book reviews

Medical ethics – an introduction

Kenneth Kearon, Dublin, Columba Press, 1995, 111 pages, £6.99

Kenneth Kearon's book is well written, well-meaning and, well, biased. The prospective reader is forewarned by the back cover which helpfully mentions that he is the Rector of Tullow Parish. Moreover he lectures at the Church of Ireland Theological College at Trinity College, Dublin and in the Adelaide and Rotunda Hospitals. In case one is still unclear as to the author's particular ethical origins, Kearon mentions in the introduction that 'the basis is Christian'. He nevertheless hopes that 'sufficient common ground will be established to enable a discussion with those of other faiths and of none'. This common ground is drawn almost exclusively from Christian sources – many of the references are theological, as are the suggested further reading sources, which hardly encourages the reader to expect a wideranging or fair discussion.

Indeed Kearon's conclusions, though couched in moderate terms, are entirely predictable and based on sources that are mildly ridiculous at times. For instance he begins his discussion of abortion by appealing to the saints. We are told that St Augustine, the fifth-century theologian believed the fetus to be ensouled on the forty-sixth day. We learn that St Thomas Aquinas claimed, in the thirteenth century, that the formation of the soul takes place at forty days in the male and ninety in the female. Kearon then moves on to present the modern viewpoints – firstly those of the ranting feminists; 'Unless reproduction can be fully controlled, women will not only remain in bondage to their sexuality, but even more to those legions of male chauvinists who use female sexuality to their own domineering ends'. The

Church, however, presents a more moderate and compassionate view, by suggesting that abortion indicates 'the kind of respect society will show to the most defenceless beings in our midsts'. Kearon then expands at length about the insurmountable difficulties of deciding when life begins and concludes that one ought to conclude it is better to be safe than sorry and accept that abortion is untenable. He quotes a Church of England report, a Roman Catholic theologian and an Archbishop of York to support his view. However, the matter of whether mothers have more rights than a fetus over their own bodies is not addressed, and neither does Kearon suggest that there are any exceptions to his rejection of abortion. To discuss the ethics of abortion without dealing with the possibility of infant handicap, or that the mother may be living in conditions unsuited to having a child, is a major omission.

The book covers a broad range of topics (though Kearon carefully skirts sticky theological areas such as contraception) and is delightfully up-to-date, mentioning pertinent legal cases from as recently as last year. Kearon's arguments are carefully prepared and beautifully presented: his elegant prose lulls the reader into accepting his opinions as correct almost without question. Each chapter ends with several points for reflection or discussion. This is a nice idea, but once again Christianity appears: 'Outline what, in your opinion, would be the appropriate Christian response to AIDS' and 'Conscience is the voice of God within us. Discuss'.

More fundamentally, Kearon fails to introduce any basic ethical concepts and consequently is able to introduce ideas as and when he chooses. He then conveniently forgets them again if they interfere with his line of reasoning. This is a serious flaw – students not only need to be taught about the current arguments and topics, but more importantly need to be given the tools of logical reasoning

and argument, so that they will be able to make decisions about new ethical problems that will arise during their careers. At present too many of the ethical decisions made in clinical practice are not discussed openly. Such reasoning needs to be made explicit – only if doctors are willing to present their reasoning for dissection and discussion can patients hope to avoid idiosyncratic and possibly prejudiced decisions, and students to learn that ethics is a necessity for good clinical practice.

There is clearly a need for a good accessible textbook on medical ethics for health care students. This is certainly not that book. *Medical Ethics – An Introduction* may provide an easy route into this field, but it fails to challenge and instead offers religious propaganda. Ethical textbooks need to move away from the didactic, and instead towards a clinical ethics approach. Such a book should provide information and techniques of critical thinking that can be applied to practical care. Kearon's book is the antithesis of this – it is narrow-minded and full of Christian dogma. I can only recommend it to Irish priests who should delight in its opinions.

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Human reproduction: principles, practices, policies

Christine Overall, Canada, Oxford University Press, 1993, 174 pages, £10.95

Last year, towards the end of her PhD research, a friend asked me if I could give her some idea of books recently published by women, on new reproductive technologies. To the surprise