

do'. I did not.

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Medical Ethics in Antiquity – Philosophical Perspectives on Abortion and Euthanasia

Paul Carrick, 242 pages, Dordrecht, Holland, £27.95, Reidel Publishing Company, 1985.

Why bother to explore the origins of Western medical ethics? With the pressing and complex problems of bioethics today 'who can afford the luxury of mounting the carousel of history for yet another ride full circle from past to present'? Having moved addictively through Carrick's study, I appreciate the vigour of his response: 'Who can afford not to?' Carrick writes his philosophical history with a style that engages the reader in a dialogue with Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Galen and Seneca. More provocative is the search for the real Hippocrates whose identity is not yet established by historical evidence.

The social and scientific setting of Greek medicine is explored with two central questions asked: what scientific, socio-economic, religious and moral constraints did the average fifth or fourth century BC Greek physician experience in his daily practice of medicine and how did these factors shape his attitudes and conduct towards his patients and towards his community? Carrick does not just trip lightly over a plethora of mute historical facts; rather he unravels with rigour the presuppositions for ancient Greek and Roman beliefs about euthanasia, abortion and infanticide. The challenge to the reader is temporarily to adopt 'a fresh conceptual orientation to fully penetrate the logic of the pagan mind' on these issues. In recognising the multiple social, cultural, and religious factors forming the beliefs of the ancients, the contemporary reader can begin more assiduously to appreciate the complexity in the formation of moral beliefs in medicine.

Carrick is intent on dispelling some prevalent myths about the ancients particularly the myths of moral

uniformity among ancient physicians, the myth of dedication to the imperatives of the Hippocratic Oath and the myth that physicians constituted an elite professional group looked on with admiration by Greek and Roman lay persons. The reader is confronted with a picture of philosophical pluralism in ancient Greece and Rome. The positions of Pythagoreans are starkly contrasted with those of Plato, Aristotle and Seneca on issues of abortion and euthanasia. Ancient texts are shown to provide a diverse range of publicly admitted reasons for the justification of either infanticide or abortion which make contemporary debates about conditions for abortion seem timid by comparison! The average Greek physician probably did not swear to uphold the famous Oath of Hippocrates. 'He may never have even heard of it!' For those sceptical of such debunking, Carrick is skilled and sensitive at showing how the process of unmasking illusions about the past is a necessary step to intellectual liberation. In the domain of medical ethics today it becomes a form of evasion to continue believing that a long revered Hippocratic tradition of medicine and ethics has been supplanted by a slipshod pluralism of the late 20th century. Misleading arguments by authorities based on alleged ancient medical tradition need exposing. A sense of confidence emerges in contemporary efforts more honestly to appraise our ethical ancestry. Carrick's final message may well be that there is wisdom to be found in the ancients and applied to the present but it is not the comfortable wisdom that for too long we have been taught.

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Why Won't They Talk to me?

Linward Productions Limited,
PO Box 63, Shepperton Studio Centre,
Studios Rd, Shepperton, Middlesex
TW17 0QD.

£295 + VAT per set of five videos each lasting about 25 minutes.

This set of five video programmes sets out to improve communications between those who are seriously ill and dying and their carers, particularly

doctors, medical students, nurses and social workers. The series demonstrates good and bad ways of talking with patients, using the skills of a group of actors who have been specially trained to recreate the emotions and reactions of patients facing serious illness. The presenters are Dr Rob Buckman, a consultant medical oncologist and also well known as a television wit, and Dr Peter Maguire, a consultant psychiatrist, whose special interest is communication skills in patient care.

On the basis of the compilation tape sent for review the series is clearly beneficial as a teaching aid, demonstrating in a vivid and dramatic way both crass and incompetent, and friendly and effective ways of talking about these painful issues. Again, judging on the basis of the compilation tape there is not much discussion or analysis of the ethical issues raised, so readers of this journal would be likely to want to supplement the content of the tapes if they used them for teaching purposes. On the other hand as a starting point for teaching concerning the doctor/patient relationship, truth-telling, dealing with conflict, and associated issues in medical ethics, the tapes can be heartily recommended as sympathetic, practical and clinically based introduction. However, although they are apparently subsidised, they are rather expensive – perhaps their expense would be justifiable within the context of libraries and teaching centres.

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Abortion: Medical Progress and Social Implications

Ciba Foundation Symposium 115, 285 pages, Avon, The Pitman Publishing Co Ltd, 1985.

'The need to check the unlimited growth of the world's population has been accepted by most responsible authorities . . .'. So states David Baird in his introduction to the papers which form the basis of the Ciba symposium on abortion. If one accepts his first statement without enquiring as to what constitutes a responsible authority or whether there is any evidence that unlimited growth of the world's population is indeed the actual consequence if birth control methods