It is predominantly a technical-scientific book with only one chapter out of 35 devoted to the ethical aspects of xenotransplantation. This chapter is written by Dr R A Wright, Director of the Biomedical and Health Care Ethics Program, at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. An overview of the arguments pro et contra is given in an ethical framework, referring to the moral worth of actions in terms of consequences, duties, and rights, the duties consisting of observing the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice.

The overview is well written and is a good introduction to the ethical debate about xenotransplantation. It therefore seems to fit well with the rest of the book, which will most probably be read by those whose main interest is technical-scientific and who might have little knowledge of medical ethics.

For those familiar with the principles of ethical argument, however, the chapter is less interesting. The words deontology and utilitarianism are not even mentioned and it is not a deeply penetrating philosophical analysis. After some of the positions have been described, one is left with the feeling that important arguments are missing. For example, there is discussion about whether animals have rights at all or whether their possible rights are overridden by the rights of humans. A recursion to arguments for slavery would have been relevant, since they followed the same lines: slaves had no rights, or they were regarded as belonging to a lower degree of mankind, or the use of them was defended on utilitarian grounds. Similarly, the discussion on 'speciesism' and the literature showing that there is no metaphysical difference between humans and animals could have covered the obvious lack of logic in much current ethical debate to do with experimentation on fertilized human eggs whereby this is sometimes forbidden, the only reason being that the eggs are human; while at the same time, experiments on chimpanzees and their possible use in xenotransplantation are advocated, disregarding the fact that the intellectual capacity of a chimpanzee by far exceeds that of a small child.

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Family planning: practice and law
Kenneth McK Norrie, Aldershot,

The ethical and legal issues surrounding contraception have been so extensively discussed in recent years that any new work has something of a presumption to overcome as to its usefulness. Kenneth Norrie’s book overcomes this effortlessly, providing a detailed and well-researched treatment of the many areas of this controversial area of law. For the reader interested in the ethical dimensions of the matter, there is a great deal of value in this work as well, in that it is impossible to separate the legal decisions on these issues from the general moral debate.

Some of the issues canvassed by Norrie are familiar features of the literature; others have attracted less attention. One of the latter is the question of the rights of sexual partners, a matter to which Norrie devotes an entire chapter. This chapter begins with the warning: ‘It should never be forgotten that the process of human reproduction necessarily requires two individuals’. Forewarned, we then read that ‘reproduction may take two, but birth control requires only one’. That, really, is the problem, and Norrie proceeds to give an exceptionally thought-provoking account of how this problem has been addressed in the law. Such cases as there are have been been tended to be concerned with abortion, and arguments as to any right of the father to prevent an abortion have been coldly received by the courts. Nor does the law give any right of consultation on the matter, taking the view that the matter is solely for the person whose body is affected by the procedure.

This emphasis on the rights of the individual is evident as well in other areas. In relation to the question of the sterilization of the mentally disabled, although this has been legally permitted, subject to various safeguards, Norrie points out that the grounds of permissibility have tended to be what is in the best interests of the individual rather than any social interest. Nor, it would seem, do the interests of carers weigh in the decision, except in so far as these affect the disabled individual.

This book is written with great clarity and makes easily intelligible reading for the non-lawyer. For those interested in how society has responded, through law, to this often touchy question, Norrie’s work is a first-class contribution to the literature.

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