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# NEWS

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\*\*\*Jacobson joins federal ethics commission.

DALLAS--"When it come to ethics, a lot of hand-washing gets done," says Dr. Bruce Jacobson, associate professor of Clinical Family Practice and Community Medicine at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. Jacobson is in charge of the training of 59 residents at John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth, "the largest family practice residency training program in the Southwestern U.S.A."

Jacobson is concerned about the importance of ethics in everyday life and the "hand-washing," as he says, given to this subject by law, medicine and religion. So he accepted an appointment to the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The physician attended his first meeting in August. Although the appointment to the advisory group to the President and Congress is for four years, the commission will die Dec. 31 unless there is last-minute funding provided by the Congress.

"Certain ethical issues of concern in society cross over the disciplines of medical, theological, legal and social sciences. One discipline commonly depends upon the others, 'washing their hands' of the responsibility of decision making," said the physician.

The President and Congress have assigned the commission the responsibility of evaluating these issues and drafting recommendations, which one day may be incorporated into policies of the federal government.

Instead of avoiding sensitive issues, the President's Commission has been attacking ethical problems in medicine and research since its inception under President Jimmy Carter in 1980. Most influential has been its report on the definition of death, which has been adopted by more than a dozen state legislatures and the American Medical Association. The definition includes cessation of cardiovascular activity and/or total brain death (both brain and brain stem). The advisory definition, however, does not set up criterial for establishing these physiological indicators.

Another important controversial issue the commission has dealt with is settling some guidelines for compensation for individuals who have been injured in medical research.

Before the commission closes out its business in December, reports on five medical/behavioral issues must be completed by the group. These include decisions to sustain the lives of the terminally ill and their rights to forego life-sustaining treatment, genetic screening, informed consent, genetic engineering and access to health care.

Jacobson himself is particularly interested in the whole philosophical question of access to health care: is there such a right and can and will society afford it?

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The closest thing to the public's expectation of the right to health care is the expectation raised by the 1971 law funding renal dialysis and transplant work under the End-Stage Renal Disease program (ESRD). This program was the first--and so far the only--national insurance plan for one disease. In 1980 there were 63,000 Americans participating in the program at a cost of \$1.4 billion from the Medicare budget. By 1983 it is expected that there will be 80,000 participants in the program at the cost of \$2.4 billion.

This program, says the doctor, points out a potential problem, that is are medical technologies developed more rapidly than society can afford to pay for them?

"As a physician, I'm not going to tell people they have to die when there is a treatment available that will extend life with quality even though less than ideal. The commission will be looking closely at methods of reducing health care costs in order to make health care available to the poor within the present annual expenditures."

A recent article in Science questioned the wisdom of the President's making late-hour appointments to the commission as well as the fact that many Reagan appointees have strong ties to the Republican Party. (Jacobson was finance chairman of the Tarrant County Republican Party from 1974-76 and served three terms on the Republican State Platform and Resolution Committee. Two of his children were active in the President's campaign and his wife Pat was a member of the National Committee, Reagan for President in 1980 and Texas co-chairman for finance of the Reagan Campaign in 1980.)

The family practitioner disagrees with the criticism.

"It is not in the best interest of science and ethics to think of this as a political appointment. I do not think partisan politics will enter into any of the decisions this commission will make. No doubt, however, recommendations may be colored by the philosophical background of the commission members."

Jacobson says he views the commission somewhat as he views the jury system. "We can weigh evidence and make judgments."

Why did he take the job?

"Well, I called Bill Ross (head of the school's Division of Family Planning and widely respected practitioner in both medicine and medical politics) and asked him what he thought. I have enough humility to realize I may not have the expertise to be on a commission dealing with issues of this magnitude. But Bill said, 'If you don't know nothing about somthin', use common sense. Take it. Those folks up there need you.'"

UT Southwestern Medical School Dean Kern Wildenthal said the health science center is pleased that Jacobson was appointed to the commission. "This is an important area of public service," he commented.

And Jacobson hopes the commission will be extended.

"Matters of ethics will always be with us. They're not just going to disappear on Dec. 31, 1982.

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