



A QUESTION OF ETHICS

BY BOB NICHOLS

Should a terminally ill child be told he is dying? Where does the cost factor enter into decisions of life and death? To Richard Wright, dealing with ethical issues is essential preparation for health-care professionals.

*For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
Cometh al this newe corn fro yer to yere;
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al this newe science that men
lere.*

—Geoffrey Chaucer
“The Parliament of Fowls”

The prospect of spending a year studying the works of English author Geoffrey Chaucer, and the requirement that he learn Old English along the way, literally “drove” Richard Wright out of the English department at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and virtually headlong into the waiting arms of the university’s philosophy department.

Twenty-one years after receiving his B.A. in philosophy (cum laude) from Baylor in 1968, Richard Wright, Ph.D., accepted the post of director of the Biomedical and Health Care Ethics Program at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City. In an office tucked away in a corner of the fourth floor of the HSC library, Wright is creating a new program which is, in his words, a “mind-boggling challenge.”

“The opportunity to forge my own program was really what made me decide to come here,” Wright says. “I’m not sure I would have come if I had been just stepping in and taking over what someone else had been doing.”

Wright joined the faculty at the OU Health Sciences Center in January 1989, moving from Toledo, Ohio, where he was a professor of philosophy at the University of Toledo. He also was an adjunct clinical professor of medical humanities in the department of pediatrics, adjunct associate professor of medical humanities in the department of psychiatry and adjunct associate professor of nursing ethics in the School of Nursing, all at the

Medical College of Ohio.

“Our primary objective, and our major educational goal, is to develop a coherent program of ethics education across the campus at the OU Health Sciences Center,” Wright explains. “There is a fair amount going on already; one of our immediate goals is to find out just how much. Then we will try to strengthen what we already have and develop new programs as well.”

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Although the field of academic medical ethics is relatively new, Wright hopes to develop more formal work in ethics in all seven colleges at the OU Health Sciences Center. “There hasn’t been a lot of research in medical ethics; study has only been moving along in high speed for about five years, so there’s a lot of work to be done,” he says.

“I’m not talking about ethics in general. Ethics has been around for thousands of years,” he adds. “We’re concerned with how ethics and medi-

cine and health care work together.”

Wright served as a medic in the U.S. Air Force in West Germany from 1962-1965, during which time he had considerable exposure to health care practice. “We got a pretty good taste of medical work,” he recalls. “We delivered babies, treated minor illnesses, such as colds and the flu, and did minor surgical procedures.”

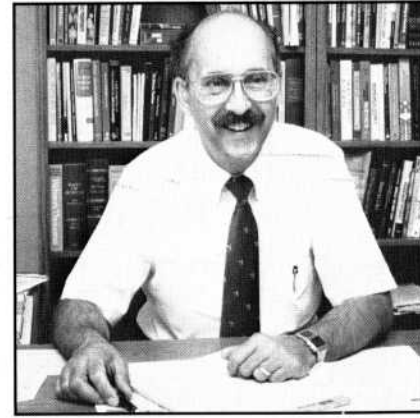
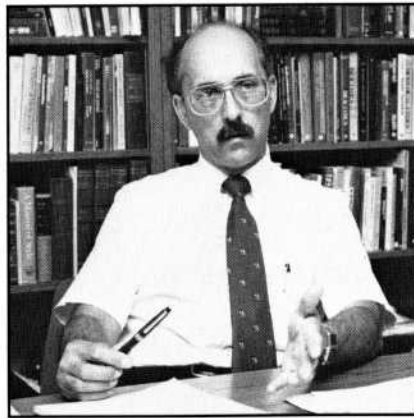
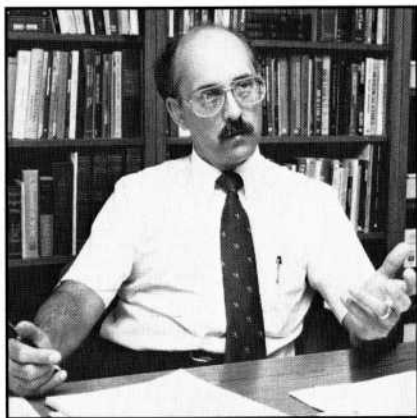
Wright enrolled at Baylor as one of the first Vietnam-era veterans to qualify for educational assistance under the GI Bill. He originally entered the university thinking about pre-med but quickly changed his mind. “I decided I wasn’t interested in doing science at the level they required,” he says. “That was back in the days when the only way you could get into medical school was to be a joint biology-chemistry major. A few fungi here and there were O.K., but 12 hours a day of science was a bit much.”

Another factor in his decision was that he recently had married, and he “couldn’t see setting up for 10 years of school before starting to earn money.

“Actually, I probably had decided while I was still in the Air Force that I didn’t want to be a doctor, but I couldn’t think of anything else to put down as a major when I applied to Baylor,” he admits.

“I had been seriously interested in English as a major for some time,” Wright says. But he took a course in American philosophy at the urging of an English professor and became interested in that area of study. “The final straw was the requirement in the

Richard Wright: A Question of Ethics



English department for a year-long study of Chaucer, and the whole course was in Old English. I quickly migrated over to the philosophy department, and I'm glad I did."

He had completed a number of college-level courses while in the Air Force and finished his undergraduate work at Baylor in 2½ years, averaging a course load of 20 hours per semester during the regular school year and doubling up on classes during the summer sessions. "Again, that was financially motivated; I knew my finances were limited, and I couldn't drag it out," he explains.

Although both he and his wife had jobs, the GI Bill assistance provided the vital resources to allow him to complete his undergraduate work. "If it hadn't been for that, I probably wouldn't have been able to finish school," he says.

After getting an undergraduate humanities degree in philosophy, Wright earned his M.A. in 1971 and a Ph.D. in 1973, both in philosophy from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"The thing that attracted me to the humanities as an undergraduate degree was that if you didn't know what you wanted to do with your life, you could obtain a degree in the humanities and do almost anything you wanted with it.

"A humanities degree gives you the opportunity to use the broad body of knowledge you have obtained as opposed to using training in a specific field, like journalism for example," Wright adds. "You learn how to read, write and think—and these skills never go out of style.

"The American Association of Medical Colleges did a study a few years

ago and found that philosophy was one of the major degrees for acceptance into medical school, although still behind chemistry and biology," he continues. "Philosophy also is one of the top undergraduate degrees for people entering law school."

But just what is philosophy? Is it some mysterious dogma practiced only by hermit-like people who spend their time sitting on the bank of a babbling brook pondering the mysteries of life?

Not so, says Wright.

"Philosophy is, by nature, exploration of ideas," he explains, "and it gives you some flexibility. One reason some people say they go into philosophy is that it's esoteric and comfortable, and there's something to be said for being comfortable. But to work with ideas, that's the real heart of philosophy."

Wright, a Newark, New Jersey, native, may have been "comfortable" when he took the job at OU, but he hardly has had time to breathe since he arrived. "Things are working out very nicely here for me," he says. "What's best is the work load. In fact, I come in each morning and have difficulty deciding where to start."

In addition to the medical ethics program he is instituting at the OU Health Sciences Center, he is involved in research projects concerning such issues as informed consent for children in cancer research and truthful disclosure of findings obtained in a physical examination.

One focus for Wright is developing an interest in adding "non-medical" courses to the curriculum of HSC's seven colleges. "That's a growing trend at health sciences centers across the nation," he contends. "Probably the best example is the University of

Pennsylvania Medical Center in Hershey, where they have non-traditional departments such as art, literature, history and philosophy.

"That type of course addresses the humanities in medicine," he says. But Wright also is concerned about adequate intellectual preparation for HSC students in academic areas other than medicine.

The reason such an emphasis is so important, he points out, is that even at a complex center such as the OU Health Sciences Center, professors do not deal exclusively with graduate students. "In fact, the colleges of medicine and dentistry — and of course the Graduate College—are the only ones which require an undergraduate degree for admission," Wright explains. "The other colleges (allied health, nursing, pharmacy and public health) have dovetail programs in which a student has achieved a basic education somewhere else and then comes here to complete a degree."

In the preface of his book, *Human Values in Health Care: The Practice of Ethics*, Wright states that the law and ethics "are quite different sorts of undertakings . . . to lump law and ethics together is to mistakenly suppose that what is legal is ethical and what is ethical is legal, when obviously neither assumption is correct."

That misconception is made, he says, because law and ethics seem related. "Very often, the law talks about the same things we talk about in ethics," he says. "But the law protects certain rights or certain ethical norms and embodies them in a more general, social framework."

Ethical issues, however, are, "by definition, eternally unstable," Wright adds. "We're never going to have abso-

lute answers to those questions.”

Although the recent heightened awareness of medical ethics in today's society is welcome, Wright believes it is also curious. As he wrote in a recent newspaper column, “physicians have been worried about ethics at least since the time of Hippocrates (460-400 B.C.), and philosophers have been pondering riddles of ethics even longer.”

Two things have prompted a closer look at medical ethics, he says—consumerism and economics. “Consumerism focused our attention on ourselves, encouraging us to see health care as a right and an entitlement,” he writes. “Since questions of rights and entitlements are questions of ethics, it naturally follows that consideration of ethics becomes more important.

“Economic concerns focused our attention on our pocketbooks, encouraging us to think about how the health care dollar should be allocated,” he adds. “Since allocation of resources is a question of justice, and justice is a question of ethics, ethics again becomes an important concern, especially when those allocation issues intrude into more and more people's lives.”

An example, he says, might be a case in which extraordinary measures are being taken to keep a patient alive at an immense cost to society. “People are going to have to decide just how much it is worth to keep that patient alive.”

In an effort to get additional ethics course work integrated into the curriculum of the colleges, Wright plans to conduct continuing education seminars on ethics and recently was awarded a \$99,000 grant by the Presbyterian Health Foundation in Oklahoma City to help fund his program and foster faculty development over the next few years. “This would allow faculty members to take a year's sabbatical, for example, and study ethics on some other campus,” he explains.

“I also would like to see a weekly seminar on ethics for the teaching faculty,” he adds. “This would include readings and discussion which would be a solid learning experience to enable the faculty who want to teach ethics to get a broader base and a deeper understanding of the issues involved.”

Still a teacher at heart, Wright also hopes next year to teach the ethics component of the year-long introduction to medicine course that all first-year medical students take. “The course has a lot of things related to the humanities, such as the history of medicine, ethics, law and psychosocial factors of health care,” he says. “There's no hard science at all, but it includes issues such as the human dimension of physical exams and how to recognize the patient as a person as opposed to an object.”

In addition, he plans to conduct several conferences sponsored by a different college each year, to present discussion on ethical questions to interested health care professionals and lay persons from both on and off campus.



Wright and Dr. Mary Anne McCaffree, professor of pediatrics, take time out for some “shop talk” in the midst of rounds at Children's Hospital of Oklahoma.

Wright has a willing consultant at home in planning his sessions with health care personnel. His wife of 23 years, Patricia, is a cardiac surgery nurse specialist, a member of the HSC surgery team headed by Dr. Ronald Elkins. The Wrights have two children. Their daughter Sandra is a computer programmer and systems analyst in Toledo, where she, her husband Bill and their nine-month-old son Alex live. Son Eric, a 19-year-old student at Bowling Green University in Bowling Green, Ohio, is planning a career as a pilot.

Wright is a “recreational carpenter”

and would like to do some “serious woodcarving” someday. He also is an avid reader, a bicyclist and a fan of sailing. His eyes take on an added gleam when he talks about sailing. “I'm especially interested in the era of the clipper ships,” he says, leaning forward in his chair and assuming his “philosophical” look. “I wish I could have lived in the 1800s and experienced the cracking sails and rolling deck of a ‘three-master.’ What a way to travel!”

As with many people, Wright has his father, a former supply manager for the Prudential Insurance Company, to thank for shaping many of his attitudes about life. “By example, my father taught me to work hard. But he always encouraged me to think

about what I was doing,” Wright says. “Running out and doing something without thinking about the consequences was unthinkable, and I guess that's sort of the basis for being a philosopher.”

Wright stresses that “at a certain point, people are going to have to get back to having enough chutzpah to look at something and take responsibility for it. It's the old ‘the buck stops here’ kind of thing.”

“And, now that I think about it, I guess that's the connection I have with ethics,” he adds. “We all have to be responsible for our own actions.”