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ACHIEVING THE FULL VIEWPOINT

As this is written, a young girl lies in a hospital in New Jersey, her very existence being sustained by a battery of complex machines and instruments. We use the word "existence," rather than "life," because depending upon one's definition of life, it can be argued that medical technology is just maintaining isolated physiological processes and that, in fact, she is already dead.

The controversy that swirls about this girl is both heartrending and complex. Some physicians agree that her brain function has been irreversibly destroyed, but nonetheless contend that on legal, liability, or ethical grounds they are prohibited from unplugging the apparatus that maintains her artificial existence. Even the theologians appear to be split, with opinions divided as to where the limit lies concerning our obligation to maintain human life.

Our purpose here is not to offer any opinion on this most unfortunate case. Hopefully, it will have been resolved long before this journal reaches our readers.

We do, however, feel that it drives home the need for broad-based input in reaching decisions on many matters and issues facing society. We recently heard a clergyman comment upon the case mentioned above, and he pointed out that this question could not have even arisen twenty years ago because the technology did not exist at that time. We now have technology available that presents us with options never before known. This is true whether the subject is heart transplants, or environmental protection, or child-proof containers.

Each of these questions involves a multiplicity of issues and of viewpoints. If a complex medical decision arises, it is no longer adequate or satisfactory to create a panel consisting solely of physicians for purposes of reaching a decision. Other health-care practitioners must be included, as well as persons who reflect other considerations such as the moral and legal aspects.

Many corporations are beginning to recognize this fact and are broadening their boards of directors. Formerly, banks were run exclusively by bankers, industries by industrialists, and so on. Slowly, but surely, this is changing. And contrary to initial expectations, inclusion of these nonspecialists appears to have been beneficial to the dynamic growth and financial health of the corporations involved.

Presently, there is a movement toward expansion or reorganization of the state boards which regulate the respective professions. The intent again is to broaden the makeup of these groups in order to provide a cross section of backgrounds and input. If we subscribe to the belief that a profession exists to serve the public, then it would seem to follow that the public should have at least some voice in how that profession is regulated and, most importantly, should be in a position to ascertain that the particular regulatory body is regulating on behalf of the public rather than in the self-interests of that profession.

Even the Food and Drug Administration has been routinely including a consumer representative and an industry representative on each of its recently appointed advisory panels.

And finally, scientists, too, need to recognize that their actions and decisions are subject to reasonable review, scrutiny, and question. "Scientific freedom" is limited by the same constraints as the exercise of other "freedoms." And nowhere in science is the need for broadened input of viewpoint more evident than in the matter of grant review and approval.

Two years ago, our column was titled "Peer Review under Fire" and discussed the unhappiness then prevalent with the National Institutes of Health and related federal government grant programs. Rather than improve, this situation has deteriorated further during the interim. In our opinion, the prognosis for peer review as it presently operates remains dismal at best, unless there is a prompt reorganization of the system to involve participation by nonscientists.