

## Dr. Edwin Forman on the nature and practice of medical ethics



*The following remarks were delivered by Dr. Forman upon his receipt of RIMS' Rakatansky Award for Medical Ethics and Professionalism on September 26, 2009, at the Dunes Club. The Rakatansky Award was established by vote of the Council in 2008. Dr. Forman was the second recipient of the Award.*

Thank you, Dr. Siedlecki, for your over-kind remarks. I am deeply appreciative of this honor and grateful to the Rhode Island Medical Society for giving me this award. I also want to thank my wife, Sylvia, for her support, and in particular for the innumerable and valued discussions with me about the essence of patient care. And I must express gratitude to my friends – mentors – colleagues, the philosophers John and Rosalind Ladd\* who guided me in the field of ethics.

The gracious introductory remarks spoke of my efforts in research and development of the pediatric oncology program in Rhode Island. But my primary focus has always been on the cure of the afflicted children and the support of their families. People ask, "Why do you work in such an

agonizing field?" My best answer, after years of reflection, is that I thrive on, and need, the intense relationships that develop. Sometimes there are terrible, intolerable losses, other times wonderful achievements, but always a rich and enduring closeness.

There is an ancient Greek saying which I learned from a colleague and well-known pediatric ethicist – Dr. Lainie Friedman Ross: "A doctor has opportunities for studying human nature which are given to no one else, wherefore a philosopher ought to begin his life as a doctor, and a doctor should end his life by becoming a philosopher." It was in 1974 that I faced a problem with one of my patients – a fourteen-year-old young man I was treating for acute myelogenous leukemia. After a few remissions, the disease became resistant to standard therapy. His mother, desperate to keep him alive, urged me to try one experimental drug after another – each producing only a transient response and moderate toxicity. My patient indicated, indirectly but clearly, that he wanted no further treatment. Who was I to serve? The answer was not in medical textbooks or literature. The question concerned values, and, as I was to learn, required moral reasoning. At that time, a Brown University program to study medical ethics was

just beginning. I joined the endeavor, and a new element in clinical practice was opened to me.

A word about what Ethics is – "no small matter but how we ought to live," said Socrates. While morality is what we have been taught and believe is right, and law is codified morality with sanctions, ethics – as a branch of philosophy – is actually a method for determining the right thing to do. Although not achieving final proofs like calculus, the position with the best arguments – which involve highly-prized human values as well as scientific facts – ought to prevail. Thus ethics requires moral reasoning, utilizing principles such as right, utility, and fairness. To explore what great minds have written on these subjects and to engage in open-minded discussions with one's peers is an extraordinary experience.

I believe that moral reasoning, which gets better with practice, has several rewards. It makes an individual a better listener and communicator and, by giving "reasoned recommendations" which take into account a patient's values as well as the medical facts, more effective in persuasion. It enhances the physician-patient relationship. And, finally, it enriches one's professional and personal life. To paraphrase the eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell: "Ethics is to be studied, not solely for the sake of any final answers to such questions, since no such answers may, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves, because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation."

I invite you to study, reflect on, and involve yourself in medical ethics. Try it – I'm sure you will like it!

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with all of you. ❖

\*John Ladd is professor emeritus at Brown University and author of a paper entitled "The Good Doctor and the Medical Care of Children."