



American Academy of Health Physics  
American Board of Health Physics

## Corner

Nancy M. Daugherty

Address contributions for "CHP Corner" or *CHP News* to:

NANCY M DAUGHERTY CHP

EDITOR *CHP NEWS*

511 N BERMONT

LAFAYETTE CO 80026

Home: 303-673-0283

### **Professional Ethics: Excerpts from the Final Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments**

Joyce P. Davis, CHP, suggested the material included below for this month's "CHP Corner." Joyce wrote:

"There is an interesting discussion of ethics, including professional ethics, in the 'Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments Final Report' (October 1995). I think AAHP members might benefit from reading some of it, to get a background on the issues involved in professional ethics and to help them decide what the AAHP 'Standards of Professional Responsibility for Certified Health Physicists' should encompass. The relevant part is Chapter 4, pp. 196-223. Of particular interest are sections on 'Three Kinds of Ethical Standards,' 'Basic Ethical Principles,' and 'Rules of Professional Ethics.' The section on 'Factors That Influence or Limit Ethical Evaluation' may be of interest to those who will be evaluating compliance with the Standards. Of course, the main focus of the Report is the ethics of human experimentation, but there is enough general information provided to make it useful in other areas of ethics application."

Space permits only limited quoting from the ACHRE Report. However, copies may be purchased from the U.S. Government Printing Office, phone 202-512-1800 (stock no. 061-000-00-848-9). For Internet access see:

<http://www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive/radiation>.

The following excerpts are quoted from the Report:

#### **Three Kinds of Ethical Standards**

A recognized way to make moral judgments is to evaluate the facts of a case in the context of

ethical standards. The Committee identified three kinds of ethical standards as relevant to the evaluation of the human radiation experiments:

1. Basic ethical principles that are widely accepted and generally regarded as so fundamental as to be applicable to the past as well as the present;
2. The policies of government departments and agencies at the time; and
3. Rules of professional ethics that were widely accepted at the time.

#### **Basic Ethical Principles**

Basic ethical principles are general standards or rules that all morally serious individuals accept. The Advisory Committee has identified six basic ethical principles as particularly relevant to our work: "One ought not to treat people as mere means to the ends of others"; "One ought not to deceive others"; "One ought not to inflict harm or risk of harm"; "One ought to promote welfare and prevent harm"; "One ought to treat people fairly and with equal respect"; and "One ought to respect the self-determination of others." These principles state moral requirements; they are principles of *obligation* telling us what we ought to do.

Every principle on this list has exceptions, because all moral principles can justifiably be overridden by other basic principles in circumstances when they conflict. To give priority to one principle over another is not a moral mistake; it is a reality of moral judgment. The justifiability of such judgments depends on many factors *in the circumstance*; it is not possible to assign priorities to these principles in the abstract....

It is important to emphasize that the validity of these basic principles is not typically thought of as limited by time: we commonly judge agents in the past by these standards....

#### **Policies of Government Departments and Agencies**

The policies of departments and agencies of the government can be understood as statements of commitment on the part of those governmental organizations, and hence of individuals in them, to conduct their affairs according to the rules and procedures that constitute those policies. In this sense, policies create ethical obligations. When a department or agency adopts a particular policy, it in effect promises to make reasonable efforts to abide by it.

At least where participation in the organization is voluntary, and where the organization's defining purpose is morally legitimate ..., to assume a role in the organization is to assume the obligations that attach to that role. Depending upon their roles in the organization, particular individuals may have a greater or lesser responsibility for helping to ensure that the policy commitments of the organization are honored....[An] extenuating circumstance is that the policy in question is unethical. In that case, we would hold an individual blameless for not attempting to implement it (at least if the individual did so because of a recognition that the policy was unethical)....

#### **Rules of Professional Ethics**

Professions traditionally assume responsibilities for self-regulation, including the promulgation of certain standards to which all members are supposed to adhere. These standards are of two kinds: technical standards that establish the minimum conditions for competent practice, and ethical principles that are intended to govern the conduct of members in their practice. In exchange for exercising this responsibility, society implicitly grants professions a degree of autonomy. The privilege of this autonomy in turn creates certain special obligations for the profession's members.

These obligations function as constraints on professionals to reduce the risk that they will use their special power and knowledge to the detriment of those whom they are supposed to serve....

Unlike basic ethical principles that speak to the whole of moral life, rules of professional ethics are particularized to the practices, social functions, and relationships that characterize a profession. Rules of professional ethics are often justified by appeal to basic ethical principles....

In one respect, rules of professional ethics are like the policies of institutions and organizations: they express commitments to which their members may be rightly held by others. That is, rules of professional ethics express the obligations that collective entities impose on their members and constitute a commitment to the public that the members will abide by them. Absent some special justification, failure to honor the commitment to fulfill these obligations constitutes a wrong. To the extent that the profession as a collective entity has obligations of self-regulation, failure to fulfill these obligations can lead to judgments of collective blame. ■