

Editorial

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

During the preparation of the symposium which is featured in this edition, we found ourselves continually challenged by areas of inadequacy and controversy. Certain of the terminology and problems of the aging process presented in such a way as to force us more and more into generalities; to avoid the specifics with which we were not equipped to deal because of the limits necessarily placed on our personal experience.

This is far from an apology for what is to follow, rather to the contrary, it is an introductory word to the infinity of the problems which have been disclosed here. Unwittingly, medicine has altered the delicate homeostatic mechanism by which nature controls her numbers. The onset of the symptoms thus produced have been so slow and insidious that they have appeared, for the most part, unnoticed. This is evidenced by the vagueness with which pathological mechanisms are differentiated from the physiology of senile conditions, by the apparent general ineptness of society to provide for those who have given of themselves for its perpetuation, and by the promotion of pain from its station as "nature's warning sign" to nature's torturing punishment for those who carry the battle for life far beyond previously accepted terminal stages, even into oblivion.

Our predecessors have placed in our hands the rewards of a longer life along with the inevitable problems they entail. These problems have superceeded the bounds of practicality and have entered the realm of morality and philosophy. Greater and greater grows favor of the concept that man had already intervened to too great an extent in the process by which nature administers her final analgesic effect. This idea, contrary to the psychological teaching of today, tends to separate the pain racked body from the mind feebly existing with it. It does so by allowing us to consider withdrawal of the so called "extraordinary" means, the means by which we are able to postpone the inevitable; allowing the mind, the person himself, all the life to which it is rightfully entitled. Though it speaks to the contrary, it never stops hoping and wanting for more. The "ordinary" means today are no more than the "extraordinary" means of yesterday constantly practiced and refined into a usable and acceptable product of knowledge.

The now traditional argument against euthanasia have made it clear that the physician's duty to preserve life must be interpreted quite literally, despite an equally impending obligation he feels towards the patient attended by "useless" pain. The question of misinterpreting prolongation for preservation of life is misleading since prolongation implies that a definitive termination time is known. This literal interpretation requires of the modern physician that he stand above and apart from the disease and pain which he is trying to conquer, that he not let sympathy slip into empathy, and that he realize that the proper response to the difficult challenge of today means further success for medicine and for humanity in the future.

It is discouraging that we are all too often prone to accept our current gains with finality. We neglect our obligation as scientists, which should be, as Ibanez points out; to have a total perspective, to see things in view of eternity and in view of totality. "To live perceptively in this manner—as an investigator, as a man with a sense of history, who bears in mind that our present work is the result of the heritage handed us by our forebears and in itself the heritage of the future, and as a philosopher at heart who loves wisdom although he never attains it, just as sailors never reach the stars they follow on their path across the ocean—to live thus is to be a complete man."

If there is to be anything gained by this symposium, we would like the gain dedicated to the elders of our humanity. Those that have come before us to give us their much needed wisdom, those that find themselves misplaced in a society that was not prepared for them and those that refuse to deny the validity of struggling for the last bits of life that are rightfully theirs. These are the heroes who, unknowingly, are chosen to fight a battle, along with us, that only their children can benefit from. This, in itself, is a form of eternity.

R. B. L.

Reference:

Felix Marti-Ibanez, Centaur, M.D. Publications Inc., N. Y., 1858.