



## FROM BIRTH TO DEATH AND BENCH TO CLINIC

# THE HASTINGS CENTER BIOETHICS BRIEFING BOOK

for Journalists, Policymakers, and Campaigns

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### INTRODUCTION

## Why A Bioethics Briefing Book?

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# Why a Bioethics Briefing Book?

BY THOMAS H. MURRAY  
*PRESIDENT, THE HASTINGS CENTER*

I arrived at The Hastings Center for my first tour of duty in the fall of 1979, and it did not take long to realize that the Center was working on matters vitally important to everyone. Some issues, like genetic testing or the ethics of performance enhancing drugs in sports, required peering over the horizon—and persuading skeptical funders that they were important. Other crucial problems were being studied, as well: patients' relationships with their physicians, reproductive technologies and surrogacy, ways to recover organs for transplantation, the knotty decisions made every day in neonatal intensive care units, how we die, and what it would mean for people to control the circumstances of their deaths. Why, I wondered, were these vital issues not on the front pages of newspapers?

Well, it may have taken a couple of decades, but I learned once again the wisdom of the adage, “be careful what you wish for.” I returned to the Center in 1999, about the time that public attention to the issues the Center had championed for 30 years was increasing sharply. The sequence of the human genome was soon to be published, the first human embryonic stem cells had just been produced, and, a few years later, the public agony of the prolonged dying of Terri Schiavo would dominate our conversations and our politics.

The Schiavo case snapped into clear focus two intersecting trends. The Hastings Center no longer had to plead for attention to the issues we'd always believed were important: the American people, their elected representatives, and journalists were now watching closely. This is good news.

On the other hand, the tenor of the debate had

changed. These issues have always stirred vigorous and often heated disagreements among bioethicists. But those disagreements were (almost) always respectful. And, perhaps more important, the disputants were usually very careful to try to understand the opponent's point of view, to look for agreement on the facts, and then to try—energetically and persistently—to persuade them. Opposing views were characterized but not caricatured; opponents were deemed to be mistaken, certainly, and deluded, perhaps, but not to be malevolent, willfully ignorant scoundrels. The prevailing attitude was get your facts right and your arguments clear and then let the best side win.

At the time of the Schiavo case, my sense was that, in the public sphere at least, the guiding ethos of spirited, respectful debate was being shoved aside by masters of spin for whom unfavorable facts were mere inconveniences to be tossed aside or twisted, people who were interested only in winning points and making those who disagreed with them look like knaves or fools, or both. This is bad news. (The pun is intended.)

The Hastings Center is fortunate to count among its close friends most of the genuinely thoughtful scholars on all of the issues discussed in this briefing book—conservative and liberal, secular and religious, scientist, physician, philosopher, theologian, lawyer, and social scientist. All of these groups are represented among the contributing authors. We believe that the best, most comprehensive understanding of complex issues requires the insights of many different disciplines, professions, and perspectives. It means listening, carefully and attentively, not just talking. It means taking seriously views that conflict with our own—even those

that make us squirm. Those views may be profoundly mistaken. But we won't be sure of that until we've heard, weighed, and critically examined them. The authors in this volume—while bringing their own perspectives and opinions—respect this tradition and have accepted the challenge of presenting both sides in their essays. This volume is a sampling of that dialogue, and an invitation to participate in it.

The Ford Foundation listened patiently to our plea for a capacity-building grant that would allow The Hastings Center to foster a more nuanced and respectful public conversation on bioethics. That grant permitted us for the first time in the Center's history to expand our primary audiences beyond the scholars and clinicians who continue to be central to our mission. We can now also reach out to the policymakers, journalists, and opinion leaders who have patiently tried to decipher from our scholarly reports and articles the nuggets that pro-

vide useful insights or demand practical actions.

Building on the capacity supported by the Ford Foundation we conceived the idea of a bioethics briefing book for the 2008 campaign and 2009 transition, though its utility should persist well beyond these periods of change. Two other supporters stepped forward to help this idea become a reality: The Greenwall Foundation and the Lounsbery Foundation.

In 2009 The Hastings Center will celebrate its fortieth anniversary as an independent, nonprofit, and determinedly nonpartisan institute dedicated to creating and sharing knowledge on ethical issues in health, medicine, and the life sciences. We hope this bioethics briefing book will make it easier for those who believe with us that good ethics begins with good facts to get a solid handle on those facts. For those who seek a deeper understanding and appreciation of thoughtful ethical analyses of these issues, this book is for you.