

Historical keywords

Bioethics

Of a recent vintage, bioethics appeared in print only in 1970. Bioethics, the Science of Survival (*Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*) was the call to arms of a professor of biochemistry and oncologist, Van Rensselaer Potter. Independently, a few months later, R Sargeant Shriver and André Hellegers of the Catholic university at Georgetown, Washington, DC, hit upon the word when trying to name what became, in 1971, the Joseph and Rose Kennedy Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction and Bioethics. Whereas for Potter "Man's survival may depend on ethics based on biological knowledge, hence bioethics", Shriver and Hellegers needed a catch-all term to describe philosophising around biomedical dilemmas, especially that done by people outside the medical profession. While Potter saw bioethics as a new discipline combining science and philosophy, the Georgetown philosophers and theologians regarded it as a branch of applied ethics. But events overtook them: media revelations of experiments on uninformed patients, civil rights and women's movements, among other political, social, and economic events of the 1960s and 1970s, facilitated the empowerment of "bioethicists" to advise on the ethical limits of medicine and biotechnology. In the UK, both the medical profession and those moralising on it from the outside tended to regard bioethics as an Americanism associated with priestly-looking interlopers acting as moral police. While some denominated centres for its study sprang up in the 1980s and 1990s, "medical ethics" was usually the label of choice.

Hardly wet behind the ears, bioethics seems destined for a short lifespan. Conspiring against it is exposure of the funding of some of its US centres by pharmaceutical companies; exclusion of alternative perspectives from the social sciences; retention of narrow analytical notions of ethics in the face of popular expression and academic respect for the place of emotions; divisions within the discipline (including over its origins and meaning); and collusion with, and appropriation by, clinical medicine. To many, its embrace of everything bearing on human life renders it, paradoxically, bankrupt. The one exception to its literal demise may be in historical studies, in which it signposts the emergence of a set of tensions and realignments within the social relations of late-20th-century medicine.

Roger Cooter

Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL
e-mail: r.cooter@ucl.ac.uk

Lifeline

Geoff Raisman is the director of the Spinal Repair Unit at University College London, UK. He started with a medical degree, but then went into neuroanatomical research. He was hooked by finding that the brain can form new connections after injury, and has spent the rest of his life trying to turn this into repair. Now, using transplants of adult nasal lining cells, he hopes to return to his medical roots and start clinical trials into repair of spinal cord injury.



What has been the greatest achievement of your career?
Finding that repair of the brain and spinal cord is possible.

What do you think is the most over-hyped field of science or medicine at the moment?

Stem cells: not because they are devoid of promise, but because the dotcom-like flow of funds into this topic will make it difficult to sort the wheat from the chaff.

And the most neglected?

Skin: we understand so little of this vital organ.

What do you think is the greatest political danger to the medical/scientific profession?

Bureaucracy: "jobsworths" watching their backs will in the end stifle all initiatives, not only in medicine and science.

What research has had most effect on your work?

My observation that new synapses form in the adult rat septal nuclei after lesions of the fimbria opened up the idea that brain and spinal cord injury could be repaired.

Who is your favourite politician and why?

Tony Benn; he is honest, decent, and cuddly. (Do any of our present politicians live up to those criteria?)

What is the best piece of advice you have received?

From my Uncle Myer: "Let others be happy".

What is your greatest regret?

I quote Tom McGuire, a trade union leader in 19th-century Leeds: "My only regret is to be shuffled eternally out of the place after one small scrappy peep at the big show."

What alternative therapies have you tried?

Absolutely none.

Do you believe there is an afterlife?

Absolutely not.

What is your favourite book, and why?

James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It has an undefinable beauty, so explanation cannot replace reading it.

What is the least enjoyable job you've ever had?

Sweeping wet sawdust across a smelly school changing room as a penalty for avoiding physical training (which I feared even more).

What was your first experiment as a child?

Aged 7, I tried, and failed, to find proof of God's existence.