

**SOCIETY*****Redefining "Life"***

"Consensus and Controversy in Medical Practice: The Dilemma of the Critically Ill Patient" by Diana Crane, in *Annals of the American Academy* (May 1978), 3937 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

American physicians are moving toward a *social* definition of "life"—defining an individual as being alive in terms of his ability to interact with others, rather than by purely physical criteria.

Questioning more than 3,000 neurosurgeons, pediatric heart surgeons, internists, and pediatricians, University of Pennsylvania sociologist Crane found that most physicians (75 percent) agreed that salvageable patients (capable of resuming social roles even minimally and temporarily) with purely physical damage should be treated. Unsalvageable patients with mental damage, they agreed, should not be treated. But the doctors could not agree on the appropriateness of treating salvageable patients with mental damage and unsalvageable patients with purely physical damage.

For example, 89 percent of the neurosurgeons said they would operate on a salvageable patient with a blood clot on the brain if the damage was entirely physical, but only 55 percent would operate if the damage was mental. In the hypothetical case of a patient with a malignant brain tumor that was spreading to other parts of the body, only 22 percent said they would operate on this unsalvageable patient if the tumor affected the patient's mental faculties, but 50 percent would operate if the tumor affected only the patient's physical capabilities.

Organized medicine in the United States has not yet set guidelines for physicians in these matters, Crane observes, although the American Hospital Association has endorsed a "bill of rights" for patients, which includes the right to refuse treatment "to the extent permitted by law." Unlike the Swiss Academy of Medicine, which permits doctors to cut off life-prolonging treatment for dying or comatose patients, the American Medical Association has applauded court decisions that forbid such withdrawal of treatment.

**PRESS & TELEVISION*****The Not-So-Great Panama Debate***

"Covering the Canal, Or, How the Press Missed the Boat" by Walter LaFeber, in *MORE* (June 1978), P.O. Box 30056, Washington, D.C. 20014.

President Carter predicted in February on national television that the debate over the Panama Canal treaties would symbolize our maturity as a great power.

Instead, says Cornell historian LaFeber, due to a dismal performance