

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

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by the news media, the American public was treated to little more than misleading stories that "misinterpreted public opinion polls, focused on the personal contest . . . between the President and Senate leaders, and culminated in pious warnings that the treaties were not all that significant after all. . . ." Moreover, the media failed to tell the public much of anything about Panama and why the Panamanians had struggled for years to obtain the treaties giving them *de jure* independence from U.S. colonial control.

The reporting on poll results failed to convey the fact that they showed most Americans cared little about who operated the canal so long as the United States had the right, in emergencies, to move its ships to the head of the line and to intervene militarily to keep the waterway open. Once these conditions were guaranteed by the amendments sponsored by the Senate leaders—Democrat Robert Byrd of West Virginia and Republican Howard J. Baker of Tennessee—no amount of anti-treaty propagandizing through the media made much difference.

LaFeber found "pathetic" most of the coverage of Panama's economic and political complexities, its military government, its views on the canal debate (which was being broadcast by National Public Radio to Panama, complete with insults to the country and its "maximum leader") or why Panamanians rioted even after the Senate ratified the first treaty (which guarantees the canal's permanent neutrality). Panamanian President Omar Torrijos' alleged involvement in narcotics traffic received more attention in the U.S. media than any other internal Panamanian issue, even though the charges had little to do with the treaties.

Thanks in part to TV and the press, what was to have been a great debate "turned out to be neither great nor much of a public debate over the substance of foreign policy."

A Plea for Press Restraint

"Our Right of Privacy Needs Protection from the Press" by Arthur R. Miller, in *Human Rights* (Spring 1978), 1155 E. 60th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

A free press is crucial to maintaining democracy and exposing government abuses—a truth the designers of our constitutional protections found sufficiently self-evident to enshrine in the Bill of Rights. But is the press too free? Sometimes, says Miller, a Harvard law professor, restraints on the press are appropriate, notably when press freedom conflicts with another fundamental freedom—an individual's right to privacy.

Americans are beginning to recognize that their right to privacy has been jeopardized by growing numbers of government, commercial, and institutional files and data banks containing information about their private lives. Watergate's exposure of overzealous surveillance activities by the FBI and CIA underscored this concern for privacy. Now,