

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Room for a view

### The newspaper people

**T**hey are the newspaper people. I meet them every morning at breakfast. They are terrorists. They are freedom fighters. They are soldiers. They are politicians. Some days it's hard to tell the difference.

They are starving and oppressed by brutal governments. They are dying in natural or man-made disasters. They are victims of greed or stupidity. They are unlucky, in a wrong-place-wrong-time-that's-life-what-a-waste sort of way.

While eating my cereal I meet thousands dying from AIDS in Africa. I drink my orange juice witnessing the rape and pillage of Darfur. Someone who had become obscenely rich by winning a lottery has committed suicide. A car accident kills an entire family. Too many are condemned by being born in a place where there isn't enough of anything save desperation.

Sometimes I pause briefly and stare out a nearby window, momentarily overwhelmed. Yet I always return, fascinated, repelled and confused by an almost conscious sense of "it's them and not me."

A leader in a house of worship preaches violence as religion. Another excludes large segments of the population from its offices because of gender. Someone finds the image of Christ on a piece of burnt toast and sells it on eBay. Sexual orientation becomes a moral battleground. In a world with so much suffering I can't imagine that God cares what consenting adults do to find comfort in each other. Not to laugh is to weep.

The athletes of the sports' pages offer a few moments of respite. They produce lots of melodrama and little connection to most people's reality. But then, that's the appeal. The games of



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children are played by talented and overpaid men—children who may even believe what the newspapers write about them. Here there is much fantasy

and sometimes a memory-evoking trip to youth long past when games mattered so much more, and winning seemed different from losing.

The language of money and sometimes greed is celebrated in the business section. I rarely understand the instructions. Like most people, I'm far too busy working to ever be rich. My favourite part here is the cartoon Dilbert. Corporate identity is defined for the masses.

The triviality of the entertainment section barely rates any time except on weekends. Then I can wonder briefly at why celebrity couplings enlist so much interest. Am I filled with such quiet desperation that I need to live vicariously through the rich and famous. These pages are a guilty pleasure.

I find myself wandering through the obits more than I used to, and noticing

the ages of those who have died. Here there is recognition of my own mortality, uncomfortable but unavoidable.

And while drinking the last of my coffee I scan the editorial page. By now I'm in a hurry. I glance at the columns to get their flavor and then, time permitting and interest aroused, I may read on in detail. Occasionally I'm quite captured. And at times I am truly fascinated and appreciative of the analysis and understanding of complexities beyond my grasp.

When my breakfast is done, I get up and go to work. My day hasn't changed because of whom I've met. No matter. We'll meet again tomorrow, like old

friends who gather each day to review lives that never change. More is the pity for all of us.

I imagine the distance between us is very great. But I know that isn't so. Often I feel gratitude for not being one of the newspaper people. Yet a part of me knows that there is little difference, save good fortune, that separates their stories and mine. The distinction becomes less clear. They can be me. They can be all of us.

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## Book review

# Ethics in conflict

**Bioethics and armed conflict:  
Moral dilemmas of medicine and war**

Michael L. Gross

The MIT Press; 2006

384 pp US\$26.00 ISBN 0-262-57226-5

Medical ethics or bioethics is a core component of contemporary Western medical education and practice. Health care providers look to medical ethicists to help navigate health care's complex ethical issues. In Canada and the United States, hospital, medical school and postgraduate training accreditation include evidence of active medical ethics programs. Michael Gross of Haifa University in Israel, in his book *Bioethics and Armed Conflict: Moral Dilemmas of Medicine and War*, has taken up the daunting challenge of providing an historical, societal, medical, legal and ethical context to the conundrum of bioethics in armed conflict. In an engaging and deliberative fashion, he explores the ethical challenges to contemporary health care providers within and outside the military establishment.

Beyond the relatively protected environment of civilian health care sys-

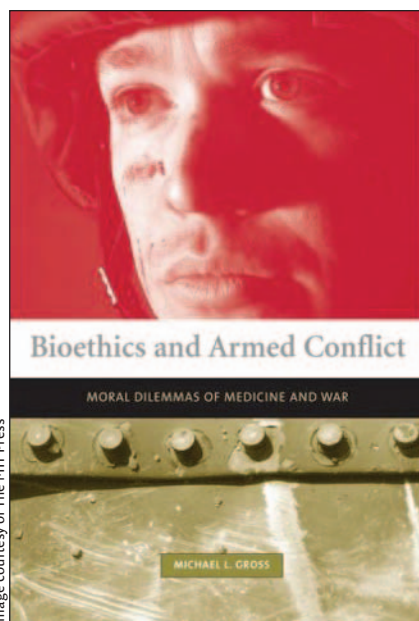


Image courtesy of The MIT Press

tems, many Western nations have had to contemplate how bioethical principles are used in the face of armed conflict. Some nations are currently engaged in military actions, often in contexts different from traditional wars fought by opposing national armies. The current nontraditional so-called "low-level conflicts," which include "wars of liberation," "guerrilla" wars, "terrorist" activities and other unconventional hostile and lethal actions have led to ethical challenges with new dimensions of complexity.

Gross poses a central question: "How does medical ethics help provide

an acceptable framework by which nations and their military health care personnel provide care to their own combatants as well as to those of their adversary and to the non-combatants that often get caught up in the conflict with devastating results?" Then he connects the premises and actions to societal values, laws and ethical practices that guide nations in their military and medical decision-making processes. He guides the reader, using an historical perspective, to understand the arguments and counter-arguments about the potential spectrum of the rules of engagement. One nation's approach to medical care within a framework of armed conflict may conflict with that of another nation or what international judicial or medical associations might recommend.

An important section of the book, addresses controversies related to "low-level" conflicts. The contemporary rules for war stem from the major 19th and 20th centuries' wars between nation-states. Many recent armed conflicts such as Vietnam and current conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Sri Lanka and parts of Africa are between armed factions. External nations get involved as members of international bodies like the United Nations or NATO.

It is with less conventional armed conflicts that the roles, responsibilities and the ethical principles of medical care become more contentious. There are often