

Many US MDs approve physician involvement in executions

Despite widespread opposition by their medical societies and organizations, substantial numbers of American doctors favour their right to participate in legal executions.

In a survey published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* (2000;160:2912-6), an overwhelming majority of physicians (74%) said it is acceptable for doctors to pronounce an executed inmate dead. This practice is frowned upon by most medical organizations. Almost half of respondents — 43% — said there is nothing wrong with doctors actually injecting condemned inmates with lethal drugs.

Groups such as the American Medical Association, American College of Physicians and American Psychiatric Association clearly oppose any participation by members in executions. Today, most of these deaths result from lethal injection.

The AMA, for example, is opposed to having physicians pronounce an executed inmate dead. If the inmate is still alive, the AMA argues, the physician might have to advise the executioner to repeat the procedure or increase the dosage. (The AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs differentiates between pronouncing the death of an executed inmate, which it opposes, and certifying death after the inmate has been pronounced dead by someone else.)

Dr. Neil Farber, chief of general internal medicine at the Christiana Health

Care System in Wilmington, Delaware, and lead author of the survey, told *CMAJ* he was “surprised and troubled” by the results. “We didn’t expect there would be this many physicians condoning their colleagues’ involvement in these practices.”

The findings were based on 482 responses to 1000 questionnaires mailed to a random national sample of doctors from all specialties.

Asked to explain the paradox of hav-

ing doctors’ organizations oppose involvement in capital punishment while individual doctors appear to condone it, Farber responded: “I guess doctors are people too. It appears as if they rely more on personal and societal values when making these judgements than on their professional ones.”

Since the US reinstated the death penalty in 1976, almost 700 inmates have been executed, 75% by lethal injection. — *Milan Korcok*, Florida

Oh bother: *CMAJ*'s Pooh article reaches around the world

On Dec. 12, the day *CMAJ*'s Holiday issue was published, the phone in Dr. Sarah Shea's office started ringing. It didn't stop for several days. “Apparently, boredom over elections, a slow news period and great public interest in Pooh and in medications created a nidus of infection,” the Halifax pediatrician says of media response to the article she coauthored with colleagues from the Division of Developmental Pediatrics at Dalhousie University.

The article, “Pathology in the Hundred Acre Wood: a neurodevelopmental perspective on A.A. Milne” (*CMAJ* 2000;163[12]:1557-9), was a spoof written for the Holiday issue, but it quickly took on a life of its own. The article became front-page news as far away as Sweden, and 3 of Britain's national newspapers — the *Times*, *Independent* and *Daily Telegraph* — commented on it, as did the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Post*; the *National Post* even wrote an editorial. (The *CMAJ* article has since been nominated for one of the coveted 2001 Ig Nobel Awards presented annually at Harvard University, themselves a spoof of the Nobel prizes.) *CMAJ* also received more than 40 letters to the editor (see www.cma.ca/cmaj/vol-163/issue-12/1557.htm).

“We could only shake our heads about the reaction,” says Shea. “We have been amused and bemused that some people think we get paid for



Fred Sebastian

this or that this work was done during some mythical 9-to-5 working hours when we should have been doing Important Things. We also noted that some readers didn't realize that the Holiday issue is not a typical *CMAJ*, which leaves us wondering what they thought of the rest of the [research] articles!”

However, most readers did get the joke. In one letter, a veterinarian complained that Shea and her colleagues had been practising veterinary medicine without a licence and suggested that they should have limited their analysis to Christopher Robin. She also said that, by brown-bear standards, Pooh is a dwarf with pica, and “tail loss in Eeyore may have resulted in damage to the cauda equina, with subsequent chronic pain and depressive demeanour.”

In a letter to the *Toronto Star*, McMaster medical student Doug Oliver defended the article, which some *Star* readers had criticized. “[The editors] showed that they know how to make people laugh. Perhaps that's the kind of medicine we all need to take a bit more often.” — *Patrick Sullivan*, *CMAJ*

New funding for chairs in women's health

Ontario's universities are being offered funding worth up to \$1 million a year for 3 years if they create chairs in women's health. After 3 years, the chairs are supposed to be self-supporting. The money will be provided by the Ministry of Health through its Ontario Women's Health Council. Chair Jane Pepino says the goal is to “promote research, knowledge sharing and increased public awareness of women's health issues.” Further information is available at www.womenshealthcouncil.com.