

Playing God in the Nursery

by Jeff Lyon

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1985, 366 pages.

There can be very few people in the United States who are unaware of the case of Baby Doe, the child who was allowed to die from a treatable birth defect in 1982 in Bloomington, Indiana. That one case set off a medical ethics controversy which continues to the present. In *Playing God in the Nursery*, Jeff Lyon uses this case as the starting point for a discussion of the medical, social, moral, ethical, legal, emotional and psychological aspects of treating newborns with birth defects.

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Mr. Lyon gives a brief overview of infanticide through history as well as an explanation of how society has responded to handicapped individuals. He challenges American ambivalence about taking care of the handicapped today. Although doctors are urged to aggressively treat every child who is born, regardless of its defects, there is very little thought given to the education that will be needed, the financial burdens that the parents will face, the need for institutions, or other custodial care. As Lyon points out, "To insist that life be extended medically and then to withdraw the necessary social services to nurture that life seems patently hypocritical." (p. 263)

He discusses some of the medical breakthroughs that have forced us to make decisions about treating various

birth defects that were consistently fatal just a few years ago. Although he does not discuss it in much detail, he does indicate that genetic engineering will also be forcing other decisions upon us, in that some of the genes that cause these defects can possibly be changed. The potential for abuse is there, and this is an area of concern for contemporary society.

There is also a chapter on the ethics of neonatal care in which there is a rather lengthy discussion about the sanctity of life vs. the quality of life. The arguments of those who are on both sides of this issue are presented in understandable terms. There is no skewing towards one side or the other; he simply presents the feelings of those who are involved in the field: physicians and medical ethicists alike.

The issues that are raised in this book are not comfortable ones. Any of them are issues we would rather ignore, but they have become a part of our society's fabric. Whether or not one agrees with all the decisions that have been made, one cannot help but feel the tremendous pressure that parents face as they try to decide what is best for their handicapped child. As I read *Playing God*, I was thankful that I did not have to personally make the choices that were being discussed. And yet I was constantly reminded that as a member of the society that has to help raise these survivors, I do have to make these choices.

It would be good for everyone—medical personnel, members of the judicial system, and "ordinary" people—to read this book. If our society is going to insist that every child be aggressively treated in order to survive at birth, then we must respond to some difficult questions as to what we will do when the child grows older. How will we help the parents financially

and emotionally? What about schooling? How do we feel about group homes? We must learn to recognize that there is a time to die as well as a time to live—the great problem lies in learning to recognize which time is which.

Mr. Lyon's final conclusion is that the decision about aggressively or passively treating a newborn child with severe birth defects should be left up to the parents, the doctor, and any other resource persons on whom the parents call. Government, which is not on call with the child twenty-four hours a day, has no business being responsible for these decisions. Those who must bear the burden must make the decision. Although there is a potential for selfish self-interest, parents have almost consistently been motivated by love for their child and a desire to do what is best for that child.

Playing God in the Nursery is easily read, whether or not one has a medical background. It includes studies of individuals as well as families. The author also includes a number of statements from those who have

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survived being born with severe defects, about how they feel about their lives. Mr. Lyon's sources are well documented, and he also includes a selected bibliography of other sources dealing with the handicapped newborn.

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