

61  
" A CONFLICT BETWEEN ACADEMIC and FOLK MEDICINE"

Amy Bogle

3-25-85

Folk Medicine 462

People everywhere are concerned with health. Every culture has a body of beliefs connected to disease and injury. These folk medical beliefs are handed down from generation to generation. In our society many health related matters are connected with religion. Many times folk medicine and academic medicine come into conflict with each other.

I recently had the opportunity to witness this first-hand. On the weekends I work part-time as a nurse's assistant at Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital, Owensboro, Kentucky. One night we had a badly injured woman admitted to the Intensive Care Unit where I was working. She had received severe abdominal injuries and a fractured femur in an automobile accident. The doctors felt it was vital for her to receive two units of blood to raise her hemoglobin count. When her husband was confronted with this, he refused. He stated that it was against their religion. The couple were both members of the Jehovah's Witness Church. The medical staff tried to no avail to reason with this man. His wife was unconscious. Therefore, it was his decision. As word got out, he was soon supported by a large group of his fellow church members. A few of the patient's family were not members of this church. They tried repeatedly to convince the husband of the seriousness of the situation but he was adamant on his stand.

His belief, as well as other Jehovah Witnesses, is based on a verse from the Bible- "Flesh with its soul- its blood- you must not eat." Genesis 9:4. They feel Jehovah entered into a covenant with mankind. If any human soul ate blood, killed animals without cause, or murdered another man he would be breaking the rainbow covenant. Since this eternal covenant is binding upon all mankind, no one is free to disobey it. This is the chief reason why the Witnesses oppose blood transfusions. They interpret eating blood either by mouth or by veins.

The woman's life was at stake. Therefore, the doctors felt it was necessary to get the court to intervene. Within twenty-four hours, the case was finally resolved by one of the district court judges. He proceeded to make the patient a ward of the state and as such, cleared the way for the blood transfusion to be given.

To the family members who were Jehovah Witnesses, receiving a blood transfusion was a health taboo. This went against their body of beliefs on treatment of disease and injuries. They felt they had failed in trying to protect this woman from being contaminated by the world through the blood. A part of their belief is that the poisons that produce the impulse to commit suicide, murder or to steal, are in the blood. To the family members who did not share this belief, it was a necessary procedure to save the life of their loved one.

The Medical Staff reacted in a variety of ways. To the doctors who daily try to save lives, it was the correct thing to do, even though it went against the couple's religious beliefs. The nurses responded differently. There was only one nurse on duty who would even hang the two units of blood. The others felt it was violating the rights of the patient.

This procedure saved the life of the patient. When she later regained consciousness, she was very upset to learn about the transfusion. When she was able to state her opinion, she said she would have refused the transfusion. Then she further said that if the situation ever came up again and she needed blood, she would refuse it, even if it would mean the difference in living or dying.

I asked one of the nursing supervisors if they had ever had a similar situation involving Jehovah's Witnesses. She told me about a woman who had an ectopic pregnancy and lost a considerable amount of blood. She needed a transfusion but refused it because of her religion. Her doctor did not force the issue.

For about forty-eight hours, the doctor did not believe she would survive. During all this time, the patient remained conscious and repeatedly refused the transfusion.

She did survive but her recovery was very lengthy. She later had complications which the doctor felt was a result of her not receiving blood when she needed it.

Like any group or sect, the Jehovah's Witnesses have a folk system of beliefs dealing with health. These beliefs are non-academic and traditionally learned. They are religiously based on a verse in the Bible. Members accept these beliefs because they have come from an authority figure such as a parent or church elder. These beliefs fit the facts as they are perceived through the eyes of the Jehovah Witness. Many may have been validated by oral tradition passed down through the years. The Witnesses are motivated by faith to take a stand against blood transfusion. They are people who consciously reject scientific medicine. When medicine competes with religion, medicine loses.

It is my belief that this group has taken a verse of the Bible out of context. Only by definitely misapplying the Scripture can they be construed to forbid deriving benefit from the very humane application of medical science. Because of this misinterpretation concerning blood, many of their members are denied life-saving treatment. However, they are not as strict as some groups who refuse any type of medical treatment.

In our community the Jehovah Witness is a minority group. This particular case received wide spread publicity . It was discussed at great length in the newspaper and on television. Prior to this incident, many people had not been aware of this particular belief. There was a lot of discussion and controversy centered around this incident.

Being so closely associated with this made me keenly aware of the conflict that can exist between folk medicine and academic medicine. It caused me to pause and think about what I might do if I were in this particular situation. If I pursue a career in medicine I may some day find myself in just such a dilemma. We are taught to protect the sanctity of life and to do whatever is necessary to save a life. Yet, we must respect the wishes of the patient as much as possible. When the patient is no longer able to make these decisions, the next of kin has this responsibility. But, in the final analysis, who does have the right to make this vital decision?