

By BRIAN BANNON

Two Roman Catholic theologians told more than 100 doctors and nurses at Hotel Dieu Wednesday they should not approach ethical medical problems — no matter how sensitive — with closed minds.

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Speaking at a seminar on medical ethics, Rev. Thomas Kelly of the University of Windsor said that although doctors have a duty to keep people alive, in some cases the preservation of life "can just as easily be an assault on the person."

He said the problems are determining where to draw the line — in which cases will the patient be better off dead? — and who should make that decision.

Rev. Michael Fallona of St. Vincent de Paul parish said he believes life is sacred, but he agreed there are times, particularly in cases where death is imminent, when a doctor should stop his efforts at keeping the patient alive.

But it was very important, he said, to be certain each case is examined individually.

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Both theologians agreed it was healthy for the health profession and society to question medical ethics.

In an interview after the seminar, Father Fallona said the official position of the Catholic church on ethical questions such as abortion is only one factor he considers when making up his own mind.

Earlier he had told the audience that since most of them come from a religious background, they probably felt more comfortable following dogma than approaching each case with an open mind.

It was also easier to follow the line of a respected institution than to come to grips with sensitive issues on a personal level, he said.

Father Fallona said Catholic and other religions have generally brainwashed adherents away from examining ethical questions and have taken that responsibility from the individual.

But he said a practical judgment made by an individual contributes to the development of a greater understanding and appreciation of life.

Father Fallona dismissed as "nonsense" the recent claim by U.S. science writer David Rorvik that a successful human cloning experiment has already been conducted.

But while he thought no such experiment had yet been successful, if even attempted, Father Fallona said nurses and doctors should not dismiss the idea.

It is possible that cloning — the test-tube recreation of a being from one cell of a parent — will be scientifically feasible in the future and its possible merits should be discussed by the medical profession.

But like Father Kelly, he said all decisions involving human life should be considered case-by-case.

Father Fallona said he takes the middle road in the debate between those who say man should not interfere with what God has created and those who advocate laboratory reproduction of humans as safer and more controlled.

Man is always developing new ideas, the merits of which aren't always known immediately. He cited the example of the airplane.

The Wright brothers' own father opposed their invention on the grounds that God meant only angels and birds to fly. However, it has become clear since that flight was a great boon to mankind, Father Fallona said. The same may apply to some biological discoveries.

Father Kelly said the continual examination of ethics represents an "evolution of the human situation."

But the challenge is "to come forth with a human response to a human reality," he told the seminar.

Doctors, nurses and other hospital workers must be prepared to make ethical decisions regularly.

Hotel Dieu social worker Sandra Kyle told the seminar that hospital employees, nurses and doctors are sometimes forced to "play God."

She said recently a teen-age girl was treated in the hospital's emergency room for slashed wrists after a suicide attempt.

Ms. Kyle said the girl was in a precarious mental state. She and other professionals at the hospital believed the girl should have been admitted.

But the girl and her parents would not consent and, although she may have died, the girl was allowed to leave the hospital.

In some cases, Ms. Kyle said, it might be better for professional staff to have the power to admit persons against their will.

That idea was criticized by another member of the seminar audience who said health professionals should try to help patients make the best decisions, but ultimately let them decide for themselves.