

Students and faculty discuss ethics in research

By: Naomi Kaskela

Posted: 2/14/07

Current hot topics in the areas of science and medical research were discussed during the "Ethics in the Sciences and Medicine" presentation Tuesday.

Specific issues discussed stemmed from the personal experiences and feelings of the various panelists as well as questions that were submitted by students prior to the panel being held. The panel was comprised of members of the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Law and the Health Sciences Center.

Gov. Rick Perry's recent mandate requiring girls of a certain age to get the human papillomavirus virus vaccine was an issue addressed in one of the student-submitted questions.

"The idea that we shouldn't vaccinate is bizarre since we vaccinate for so many other diseases," said Howard Curzer, a professor in the philosophy department. "So my view is, well yeah, the governor did the right thing. He may have done it for the right reason or not."

A possible reason why he believes Perry may have made the decision for the wrong reason is because of lobbying, Curzer said.

Several of the panelists and members of the audience said the HPV vaccine is controversial because of the manner in which it is spread.

"I think it comes down to maybe one question. Would we be as concerned if we were talking about something that is not sexually transmitted?" said Susan Fortney, a George H. Mahon professor of law.

Other topics of discussion concerning ethics in science and medical research had to do with Internet sources for information, minor errors in manuscripts and choosing a field of study.

Fortney said students using Internet sources when conducting research is something she is hoping will be addressed at the undergraduate level.

"One thing that I'm concerned about is students relying heavily on Internet research without knowing how to check those sources out," she said.

Thomas McGovern, a professor in the department of neuropsychiatry and behavioral sciences, said it does not matter where the information comes from, the sources must be acknowledged.

This is because any research conducted depends on what has been done in the past, Curzer said.

"When we do anything in research, we are always building on the works of other people," he said.

This is one reason why errors in publications, no matter how minor, must be addressed and corrected, several of the panelists said.

"The future of science absolutely depends on the data of the work of the past," said Dominick Casadonte, the Minnie Stevens Piper professor and chairman of the chemistry department. "You might not know what might be trivial in one generation might be seminal in another."

However, small mistakes in publications are not what Curzer said he is most concerned about.

"The big problem in articles is not small mistakes, it is systematic deception," he said.

Articles penned by pharmaceutical companies are among the things he defined as systematic deception.

"When doctors look to journals to get information about which drugs are better and which drugs are worse, what they are reading, although they don't know it, is ghost-written by pharmaceutical companies," Curzer said, "and that is a problem."

For Fortney, the question of whether or not to admit a minor mistake is personal.

"Maybe no one will catch it, but how do you feel about your work from there on out?" she said.

Panelists said this issue can also be addressed in the sense of personal responsibility to peers and to society.

"We're still dealing with what responsibilities we have to each other, what is true," said John Zak, a professor and chair of the department of biological sciences.

One student posed questions about choosing a field of research and the ethics behind it, which led to a discussion about applied and basic research.

Fortney said selecting a field of research in itself is an ethical decision.

"We make ethical decisions when we decide which research agenda we pursue," she said. "We treat that as an individual choice."