

Warped

by Scott McCullar



Jobs in the year 2000

Biomedical ethics studied

Push the calendar ahead to the year 2000.

Jane or John Doe, job-hunting, fill out the application at the chemical plant, then submit to a required check aimed at spotting genetic abnormalities.

The laboratory test determines if the applicant is genetically suitable for a job.

If the lab finds a bum gene that predisposes the aspiring worker to grave sickness when exposed to chemicals in the plant, that applicant will be turned down.

This is not happening on a large scale today, but it could be in the future and the question is: Will such procedures, meant to protect the susceptible person from an ailment and the company from liability, be acceptable from an ethical standpoint?

Is it right to screen out workers because of genetic makeup or even, as in the case of one company today, a lifestyle habit such as smoking cigarettes?

Scenarios along that line were among those discussed at a Hastings Center symposium on ethical issues in occupational health.

From its founding in 1969,

the center, in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., has devoted its attention to ethical issues that have emerged as a result of the biomedical revolution.

Dr. Willard Gaylin, president and clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, said the issues include informed consent, the definition of death, behavior control, human experimentation, and the allocation of scarce medical resources.

Typical questions: When is a person dead? Who gets artificial hearts if the technology becomes approved and the supply is limited? Who gets the kidney dialysis if funds for providing the treatment are limited?

Gaylin said that by 1979 it was apparent, "We had neglected a question of profound social and biomedical significance — the question of occupational health and safety."

"While we had concentrated on examining the moral issues involved in the practice of medicine, we had failed to examine the moral issues raised by the medical consequences of work," he said.

Estimates of damage Gaylin cited:

—Chemical and physical hazards in the workplace may kill as many as 100,000 American workers a year.

—Some estimates suggest that between 20 percent and 38 percent of all cancers are work-related.

"Faced with the enormity of this problem, the Hastings Center in 1979 began to devote a considerable portion of its research to the study of issues in occupational health and illness," Gaylin said in his "Overview of the Hastings Center Project on Occupational Health."

He said the study centered on the ethical and moral problems raised by corporate policies that sought to:

—Screen out workers thought to be genetically susceptible to workplace hazards.

—Prohibit the employment of workers whose personal life styles were thought to enhance their vulnerability to occupational disease.

—Bar all fertile women from jobs that were believed to pose a risk to their capacities to bear healthy children.

Among questions probed by Center experts during the past three years are these:

—Should industry be permitted to screen all potential workers?

—Should industry be permitted, even obliged, to monitor the health status of workers already employed?

"Central to our work on occupational health and safety has been an interest in social justice and attention to the questions of freedom, autonomy and personal dignity," Gaylin said.

Super Slurper, more born at research labs

United Press International PEORIA, Ill. — Inside the unpretentious walls and within the almost dowdy laboratories of the Northern Regional Research Center, discoveries have included technology to produce penicillin on a large scale and the discovery of Super Slurper, a corn starch product that can absorb up to 2,000 times its weight in distilled water.

The Peoria facility is one of four such regional centers operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, seeking new uses for crops. The others are located in New Orleans, Beltsville, Md., and Berkeley, Calif.

So far, researchers have escaped any serious damage by President Reagan's budget knife. While most domestic programs have been cut, USDA funding for agricultural research remains stable.

In Reagan's proposed budget for fiscal 1984, the centers actually would get about a 4 percent increase in funding, according to figures from the USDA.

The center's industrial coordinator, Roger Eisenhauer, an employee for 25 years, said there is a sharp contrast between the center's treatment by the Carter administration and the present one.

During the Carter administration, he said, the centers never would know what to expect: Proposals would be made to cut the funding, and Congress might or might not have restored the cuts.

"It shook up a lot of people and we lost several prominent scientists as a result," he said. "Morale was low because it kept happening over and over again."

Under the Reagan administration, the center has been able to maintain the status quo.

The facility was established in 1938 because of large surpluses of cereal grains.

"We seem to have come full circle because, again, we have another surplus situation," Eisenhauer said.

Research has been done on corn, wheat, sorghum, oats, soybeans and horticultural and specialty crops. There are about 310 staff members at the Peoria facility — about two-thirds of them with technical degrees.

Through the years, scientists have been looking for new uses

for agricultural commodities and their by-products. They also have worked on projects to increase crop yields and decrease losses both before and after harvest.

Other work has sought ways to reduce processing costs and energy consumption and to enhance food safety and quality.

While research is done on a variety of crops, the center has gained an international reputation for research on corn.

It was an accident which led to the development of Super Slurper, which now is used in everything from fuel filters to body powder. The uses seem almost limitless, Eisenhauer said.

"It's tremendous how it clears up diaper rash," he said.

There also are numerous agricultural uses for the product. Researchers have found that by coating seeds with Super Slurper, farmers get quicker germination, a better stand and higher yields.

"Coating works best in fields where there is stress from drought," he said. "If you have optimum rainfall, it probably won't do you much good."

Another major breakthrough at the center also is the result of

work with corn starch. Scientists have found a way to make a biodegradable plastic-like material.

Such a material could solve the problem of petroleum-based plastics that don't break down and remain for a long time in the environment, Eisenhauer said.

The Peoria scientists also have come up with a water soluble plastic made from corn starch that is used in many hospitals for laundry bags that dissolve in the wash, he said.

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Restoration begins on dinosaur mural

United Press International NEW HAVEN, Conn. — Russian-born Rudolph F. Zallinger, 63, is back working on the monster work of art he started 40 years ago.

"The Age of Reptiles," the world-famous mural in Yale University's Peabody Museum of Natural History, has helped popularize dinosaurs for generations of youngsters. The 110-foot long, 16-foot high mural also won Zallinger a Pulitzer Prize.

The Peabody's roof sprang a

leak recently, and a small portion of the mural — about one square foot — was damaged. Zallinger, now a professor at the University of Hartford art school, was invited to do the necessary restoring.

Zallinger was a young graduate of Yale's School of Fine Arts when museum director Dr. Albert Parr asked him to do a series of drawings for a book Parr was writing. In 1943, Parr offered Zallinger a commission for "The Age of Reptiles."

The mural in the museum's

Great Hall of Dinosaurs huge beasts heaving the 200 million years of flora fauna in the primal forest.

Zallinger said the paint faded at all. Aside from mottling, all he had was vacuum 35 years of accumulated dust from the mural.

"The Age of Reptiles" popularized dinosaurs for millions of kids in the 1950s and 1960s. The mural still does today.

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