In Memoriam

John C. Fletcher PhD

The Conscience of Our Field

John Fletcher, an internationally known bioethicist, trained originally as an Episcopalian minister, died on May 27, 2004, at his home near Charlottesville, Virginia. He was one of the founding members of the International Fetal Medicine and Surgery Society and certainly one of the most prominent bioethicists in the world.

The standard obituary for Dr. Fletcher would note that he was 72 years old and Professor Emeritus of Biomedical Ethics at the University of Virginia Medical School which he founded. Previously, he had been the Chief of the Ethics Office of the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center, and he was founder of the Inter/MET program in New York in the late 1960s to train clergy on how to deal with dying patients. John was a superb lecturer, and one of the few ethicists that could keep a clinical audience awake. He had a profound sense of getting to the real point and could easily go 'back and forth' from vague and intellectual abstractions directly into a concrete plan of management. In terms of physicians and patients, he could get through highly complex and murky situations.

John was one of the founding members of the IFMSS having been one of the first of twenty people being invited to the Kroc ranch in 1982 which then led to the Aspen meeting that formed the IFMSS in 1983. John helped establish the guidelines for fetal intervention and wrote extensively on the evaluation of risks and benefits in fetal therapy. He helped in the performance of the first and only fetal therapy experiment ever performed at NIH for the treatment of external genital masculinization in congenital adrenal hyperplasia. After 10 years as the Chief Ethics Officer at the Clinical Center, including numerous battles with administration and physicians to ensure proper care of patients with rare disorders who needed novel treat-

ments, John was offered the opportunity to become the 'Kornfeld' Professor of Biomedical Ethics at the University of Virginia where he spent the last 15 years of his career before retiring a few years ago.

John remained active in pursuit of his work and related interests despite needing to devote considerable time and effort to caring for his wife, Dale, to whom he was married for over 50 years.

My own involvement with John dates back over 20 years ago to when I was a medical student rotating at the NIH. I was working on a paper which involved some significant ethical questions and was referred to Dr. Fletcher. Despite my being just a medical student, John was willing to spend literally hours with me working through the implications regarding the subject (IVF), and we became good friends. In the ensuing 25 years, John and I worked together on multiple projects, including the ethical aspects of prenatal diagnosis, infertility treatments,

multifetal pregnancy reduction, fetal surgery, and fetal genetic therapies. We have written multiple papers together and wrote one textbook together. In fact, over the next year, a number of papers and chapters, which we worked on together recently, will continue to appear. Even up until the very last moments of his life, John was a paragon of intellectual and academic integrity. He was one who 'cut through the nonsense' to get to the salient points about behavior, programs, priorities – more so than anyone I've ever met.

I recall an episode at one of the early IFMSS meetings in which a senior investigator having heard a presentation by a very junior one, had berated him both scientifically and personally for the work being presented, John rose from his seat and told the senior investigator to shut up and to stop these personal attacks. He said there was no place in this society, where highly experimental techniques were being discussed, for confusing scientific criticism with personal attack. It was at that moment, in 1985 in Jasper, Alberta, that the core value of the IFMSS of being a place where one could present one's failures just as

easily as one's successes was indelibly imprinted into our Society. There has been, perhaps, no more important cultural imprint into the IFMSS than that particular episode and its sequelae.

John will be sorely missed by those who knew and loved him, those who worked with him, those who respected his integrity, and those who disagreed with him vehemently. John was an iconoclast to the last. He always stood up for principle regardless of its personal costs. He was instrumental in getting President Clinton to acknowledge the horrors of the Tuskegee experiment, yet, when President Clinton insisted that the ceremony be held at the White House, as opposed to going to Alabama to personally try and undo the damage, John refused to be involved, stating that it was only a half-hearted effort.

We will sorely miss John. His imprint upon fetal therapy will remain for decades. Long after many of his individual contributions are no longer remembered, the IFMSS and the field of fetal diagnosis and therapy will owe John a debt of gratitude for decades to come.

Mark I. Evans, MD