

# SURGERY

## Synopsis

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## Chairman's Message



Douglas E. Wood, MD,  
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The Henry N. Harkins  
Professor and Chair

The Department of Surgery's "Center for Surgical Ethics" has been in the making for some time, but now is on the cusp of launching. Two important events helped to set the stage this summer and fall: the first was a Day of Surgical Ethics added to the 30th Annual Summer Seminar in Healthcare Ethics in August; the other was a special Grand Rounds on October 26th focused on Surgical Ethics with renowned surgeon and ethicist, Alberto Ferreres, MD, Chair of Surgery, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In this issue of *Synopsis*, I wanted to share why the Department is creating a Center for Surgical Ethics, what is driving its creation, what it is about and what we hope to accomplish.

I have long pondered, as I'm sure many have, what it takes to be a great surgeon. Beyond technical skills, I

have thought a lot about questions such as: "What do my patients need? How can I best understand and meet those needs? What do my patients *not* know that I can help them understand so they and their families can make the best decisions for themselves? And, how do I provide information and still let them make the decision, i.e., how do I keep from putting my thumb too much on the scale?"

All of these questions have ethical dimensions. The definition of ethics put simply is the basic concepts and fundamental principles of decent human conduct, moral values, right and wrong, and standards of behavior. But, why is the study of ethics, in an organized fashion, important? Can't we just rely on our own moral compass? I began to realize that some systematic study of ethics assists us in deciding a course of action, and how we communicate complex medical decisions. Ethical principles help us articulate the challenging options we consider for our patients, and how to help them navigate their own healthcare decisions in ways that best reflect their own values and goals.

With these questions and realizations, I began to recognize that while I had good instincts, I had no formal method, foundation or vocabulary to understand how to raise and reflect on

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ethical issues or how to embed ethical decision making in a logical way into my daily professional interactions with patients and colleagues. I learned right from wrong from my parents, and I have always felt that I had a strong moral compass— these were strong foundations for an ethical life—but felt limited in the understanding of ethical principles and semantics. I determined I would benefit from improving my formal knowledge of ethics, both to give me a solid foundation for the complex decisions we make every day, but also so that I could talk about ethical issues more accurately and consciously.

When I became Chair of the Department these issues were heightened for me. It was no longer just a personal issue; now I was responsible for leading a great Department and ensuring that our faculty and our trainees not only received the best technical surgical training, but also were trained to understand how to make ethical decisions. As surgeons we are frequently faced with emergencies or immediate decisions in the operating room, and also (perhaps more importantly) to take perspective and make ethical decisions in day to day choices. I felt keenly that the ability to think and act ethically would not only set our Department apart, but would produce better trainees—trainees who could help to shape a more just healthcare system and world. I also understood it would help advance our research in ethical ways, but most of all, would enable us to better care for our patients. We would ask more frequently, “What do *they* need?” Not merely say “This is what I can do.”

In my own pursuit of a foundation for surgical ethics, I have been fortunate to have spent most of my career in this surgical department. My predecessor, Dr. Carlos Pellegrini, paved the way with his similar interest in surgical ethics. Before he stepped down, he had begun thinking about developing a more deliberate focus on ethics within the Department of Surgery. He had a long association with Dr.

Ferreres and together they wrote an **important article** on surgical ethics and discussed establishing such a center in this Department. It was a confluence of interests when I became Chair and I determined to carry the vision forward, with a plan to form a formal Center for Surgical Ethics.

What is the Center and how are we creating it? Our first step in creating the Center was to discuss the goals and coordinate efforts with the UW Department of Bioethics and Humanities led by Professor Denise Dudzinski. Dr. Dudzinski has been immensely helpful and generous with her time, support and advice as we have sought to clarify the needs for a new center. There are many opportunities for our department to partner with the Department of Bioethics and Humanities in this venture. We also have developed a formal association with Dr. Alberto Ferreres who has joined our faculty as a volunteer clinical professor. Dr Ferreres is an internationally renowned surgical ethicist and has traveled to Seattle multiple times to meet with our faculty and residents, coordinate plans for the development of a Center for Surgical Ethics, create ethics curriculum for our residents, and to present at Grand Rounds and the Annual Summer Seminar in Healthcare Ethics. There is simply no one in the world better able to give us guidance than Dr. Ferreres.

The near term goal is formal recognition by the School of Medicine and developing the Center for Surgical Ethics in partnership with the Bioethics and Humanities Department. The Center will promote scholarship and train leaders in this field of study. Our long term goals include establishing a Surgical Ethics Fellowship as well as a Certificate program in Surgical Ethics for surgeons here, around the country and world-wide. We will be one of the only places in the US that has a full Surgical Ethics Center.

But, we are not waiting for formal recognition as a Center. We are already systematically elevating dialogue centered on Surgical Ethics with our own faculty and trainees – focusing on ethical issues in the day to day management of patients.

We took our initial steps in becoming a Center this past summer and fall as mentioned above. Next summer, we will have another full day of Surgical Ethics training in the 31st Annual Summer Seminar in Healthcare Ethics – we are planning that it will be a major part of the Summer Seminar. Building upon those successes, we hope to launch the Fellowship the following year and a Certificate program thereafter.

You will read more in this issue in the article by Dr. Ferreres; how he came to be interested in Surgical Ethics as well as plans for the Department's Center for Surgical Ethics. This is exciting and challenging work. And, I believe it is more necessary now than ever. Our patients need and deserve not only great technical care, but care that puts the patient first: body, mind and spirit.

As always, our colleagues in this Department are simply outstanding. There are a number of honors and awards I urge you to read. In particular, it is an extraordinary honor that Dr. Ron Maier is now the President-elect of the American College of Surgeons and Dr. Eileen Bulger is the Chair of the prestigious American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma. These are big offices and they will fill them well. But, many of our faculty have done great things since Surgery Synopsis was last issued in the summer. I urge you to read it all.



Sincerely,

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*The Henry N. Harkins*  
Professor and Chair