The current movie "COMA" describes in dramatic and suspenseful fashion a number of medical/ethical questions surrounding comatose patients. The novel "COMA" by Robin Cook was adapted and directed into the popular movie by Michael Crichton, a physician. The villain of the play, Dr. George Harris, who is chief surgeon of the fictitious Boston Memorial Hospital (suggestive for some of the Massachusetts General Hospitals) identifies some of the issues. A basic one pertains to decision making: who makes the decision? In particular, who makes the decision regarding the prolongation of life in a person who has been declared "brain dead"? Is it appropriate to maintain "brain dead" bodies in an otherwise living, breathing condition by artificial life support systems for the purpose of using these warm cadavers to teach medical students skills and techniques that would be too dangerous or painful for them to acquire on a living patient? Is it appropriate to sell human organs in a competitive market? Other value questions raised include: What is the level of societal responsibility in view of the heavy cost of maintaining such patients? When is a patient dead? In the real world how do we control power politics in medicine, the extent to which money and prestige influence hospital policy, the misdirection of the physician’s power over patients and hospital environment?

Each of the above questions would require many words and much paper for an adequate treatment. Placing aside the issue of inordinate pursuit of monetary gain, the underlying question raised by the movie, "COMA," has to do with the appropriate introduction and use of high technology into medical practice. In light of the requirements of distributive justice, how does the community decide who gets what degree of medical care? Victor Fuchs in his works, Who Shall Live?, points out that while economics will help to make a rational choice “and to use resources more efficiently, it cannot provide the ethics and value judgments that must guide our decision” (p.7).

One of the major values of a Catholic health facility certainly is the dignity of the human person. Such a dignity demands that it be recognized and respected. In particular, each person has a right to make decisions regarding their life and health. To be a truly human act, such decisions need to be informed and free of coercive elements.

Hospital administrators and governing Boards are faced with the difficult decisions regarding the purchase and the introduction of new technology. But how can these be informed decisions when the evidence for efficacy of such equipment is not always available? Problems of this kind are compounded when other societal needs are considered. Many persons lack even rudimentary health care, while a favored few get the very best. Such inequity remains a pressing challenge for a health facility guided by Christian values.

Abort a Medical Career?

(Concluded from page two)