to confirm these results (Constance Holden, "Laetrile: 'Quack' Cancer Remedy Still Brings Hope to Sufferers," Science, Vol. 193, Sept. 10, 1976, pp. 962-965). It appears that the great majority of oncologists finds Laetrile to be worthless as a treatment for cancer, although the substance does count more than 800 doctors among its supporters, including sixty who have been willing to have their names used as referrals for patients seeking Laetrile treatment. As of the end of July, 1977, at least a dozen states have legalized the sale of the drug by prescription within their boundaries, and similar bills are being considered by a number of other state legislatures. The FDA is reluctant to sponsor new tests of the drug on the ground that it would be unethical to give cancer victims a substance known to be ineffective. There is also fear that the conducting of new tests might tend to create the false impression that medical science is unsure about Laetrile's effectiveness.

COMMENTARY: Those who argue for the continued ban maintain that it is the responsibility of the informed medical community to protect the uninformed general public from the consequences of its own ignorance. David W. Crippin, a resident in surgery at New York University Medical Center, argues that "if we, as responsible physicians, allow demonstrably ineffective drugs on the market without a fight, a great number of people who simply don't know any better will get worthless, expensive hoaxes instead of effective treatment. Someone has to take the responsibility for outlining what is reasonable and proper treatment or we'll all be up to our ears in snake oil" ("Laetrile: Cancer Cure or Quack Remedy," Hastings Center Report, Dec., 1976, pp. 18-19). Furthermore, the use of Laetrile tends to divert patients from the employment of therapies that offer a more realistic chance of cure. On the other hand, those who argue for a lifting of the ban maintain that although Laetrile does no good, its legalization would at least permit reputable physicians to employ conventional therapies in conjunction with Laetrile, and "at least the patients would no longer be in the care of quacks" (George Crile, quoted in Science, September 10, 1976, p. 985). Nevertheless, in June, 1977, the House of Delegates of the AMA, which has declared its opposition to Laetrile, voted down a proposal to recommend the nonprescription sale of the drug. The sponsors of the proposal had hoped that it would take away the profit motive from those who now deal in the drug, but the House of Delegates appeared to accept the reasoning of Dr. Jack Schreiber that it would give the public the impression that the AMA had lowered its standards on Laetrile (Associated Press 6/22/77; St. Louis Post Dispatch 6/22/77, p.8D).

The basic issue revolves around the question of paternalism ("doctor knows best") versus human freedom. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Laetrile is in fact worthless as a treatment for cancer. What follows? It is clear that the medical community has a serious responsibility to inform the general public of its findings. The question is whether the experts have a responsibility to do more, to seek a continuance of the ban on Laetrile. Let us grant, again for the sake of argument, that many of the supporters of Laetrile are snake-oil salesmen out to deceive the desperate cancer patient. To what extent may we go in protecting a presumably rational adult from the consequences of his own gullibility? The freedom to direct one's life in accordance with his own values and beliefs means absolutely nothing if it does not involve a risky undertaking allowing for the possibility of mistakes, error, and failure. The freedom God gave Adam and Eve was the freedom not only to know, love, and serve him, but also to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil if they so chose. We are our brother's keeper; we do have a responsibility to warn and inform. But the responsibility for the choice of the direction of a person's life has been left by God primarily in that person's own hands; and for us to take that choice out of his hands and place it in our own would be to arrogate to ourselves a role that even God refuses to play.