

## **Book Review.**

### **“Life, Love and Children: A Practical Introduction to Bioscience Ethics and Bioethics.”**

Irina Pollard

Kluwer Academic Publishers Boston, 2002.  
ISBN 1-4020-7294-5

Irina Pollard is Associate Professor, Biological Sciences at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

This book is, as its title says, a practical introduction, and therefore covers a wide range of issues including human development, reproduction, end-of-life and environmental issues. All of these areas are covered from the viewpoint of Bioscience Ethics. This is a term which Professor Pollard has introduced to describe the wish “to swiftly democratize major scientific advances to help promote the development of a fully informed secular ethics, free from unwelcome constraints” (page 15). Modern science and its applications has empowered bioethics – the study of life ethics – to play a greater role in legal, medical, scientific and environmental policy agendas worldwide.

The purpose of this book is to inform the reader, primarily students, but also the concerned general public, of current information arising from the findings of the sciences and thus to facilitate a more informed ethical discussion and, in turn, more appropriate policy and behaviour.

One controversial example cited in the book relates to the use of the Natural Family Planning method of contraception. Evidence has emerged that the offspring of those who use this method risk an over-representation of a variety of congenital malformations. “The above, initially puzzling, observations have now been defined in biological terms, as follows. During irregular menstrual cycles when spontaneous ovulation occurs earlier or later than estimated, the prescribed sexual abstinence does not precisely coincide with peak fertility; that is, the synchronous presence of fresh gametes at the fertilization site. Desynchronized ovulation and fertilization may facilitate the union of over-ripe ova, surviving aged sperm, or a combination of both” (page 67).

Another example is the research on the deleterious effects of alcohol and drugs on sperm. These deleterious effects can lead to birth defects. This highlights the need for couples who are seeking pregnancy to examine their lifestyle during the preconceptual period as well as during pregnancy. Importantly, the health and lifestyle of both parents from the time of gamete formation to the conception of the offspring are crucial, as is the maternal environment during pregnancy. Dr Pollard passionately believes that reproduction, being both a privilege and a responsibility, should not be taken lightly.

While Dr Pollard’s aim is admirable she does not seem to address overtly the difficulty that arises when science has no clear cut, decisive answers or where there are contradictory findings. Presumably these matters are not brought into discussion until there are satisfactory findings. However some of her discussions in the book acknowledge this limitation.

Another difficulty for Bioscience Ethics appears to be the translation of knowledge into behaviour. The known consequences of war have never stopped wars. Young people who smoke can know all the possible adverse effects but still take up smoking. Dr Pollard challenges the reader with a set of discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Serious and sincere exploration of these questions will certainly expose the reader to attitude change.

A frustration which this reviewer experienced with reading the book was the lack of direct references. Often the material provided aroused the curiosity to know more about a particular matter but there was no footnote reference to indicate the source of the information. The chapter reference sections at the end of the book helped but were limited – presumably as most of the references were from the current journal literature and not books only.

However these distractions did not ultimately detract from reading this most informative and stimulating book. Dr Pollard's broad knowledge enables her to cross disciplines and relate findings in a very helpful manner. It is written with a passion for helping people make informed ethical decisions about their own behaviour and that of others, as well as policy. She writes with a clarity that enables the reader to understand the issues she is raising and be stimulated to think more about those issues.

It has been this reviewer's pleasant experience to work with Dr Pollard on an Ethics Committee for more than a decade. This book is a genuine representation of her passion and dedication to the cause of Bioscience Ethics, her breadth of knowledge and her clarity as an ethical thinker.

This book has been basically written for students but it has a much wider audience. The work of Ethics Committees would be enhanced by being acquainted with its contents. Clergy particularly are in need of its insights as do teachers and all who work in the formation of young people. Indeed the average parent could benefit from the knowledge of its contents. However they may need to have a dictionary with them to help with some of the technical terms.

This is a great book to read. The issues raised relate to the down to earth everyday concerns of people living in the twenty-first century.

The Rev'd N. Keith Little  
Chair, Institutional Ethics Committee  
Royal North Shore Hospital  
St Leonards. Sydney.