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# A Greek Orthodox Priest's Experience in a Medical Laboratory

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## A GREEK ORTHODOX PRIEST'S EXPERIENCE IN A MEDICAL LABORATORY

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*The author describes his experience as a Greek Orthodox priest working in the field of medicine. While in medical school, the author had the opportunity to work in a laboratory that sought to provide to government authorities the results of genetic testing regarding paternity. Although his role in the entire process was minimal, he confronted several ethical issues involving informed consent, autonomy, and freedom. In addition, he often found himself in difficult situations where being a priest and a celibate complicated his obligations as a staff member in the laboratory.*

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During my second year of studies at University of Crete Medical School, my advisor, Dr. Michalodemitrakis, asked whether I would like some lab experience. I had very little exposure to the laboratory and saw this as an opportunity to participate fully in the scientific research process. After a few days, I was asked to visit to the lab.

When I arrived, I was required to complete a number of standard consent forms in order to participate in the research being conducted. I also had to sign several waivers that, in general, absolved the laboratory and its affiliates of any responsibility for any accidents or illnesses that might occur while I was working there. At the time, I felt that this was a tedious and worthless process. Later, after taking a course in human rights, I came to understand the importance of knowing what one is volunteering for. The lab is ethically responsible for informing research participants of any risks that they may encounter as part of the whole research project. This important step in the process ensures that there will be fewer issues if a problem should arise. I write fewer, because one can never plan for every possible contingency.

This particular laboratory specialized in human DNA testing and served mostly women who sought genetic clarification of the paternity of their offspring. My task was to draw blood from the men and children who came in to be tested. Many of the women who visited the lab were single mothers who had had multiple sexual partners; others were married women who had had sexual relations outside of marriage.

In Greek society, there are severe social consequences to bearing children outside of marriage, and, if the woman is married, to having children with men other than their husbands. If a man is not married to the woman who bears his child, he does not have any legal or financial responsibility toward the child or the mother and, therefore, he can choose to have nothing to do with them. Unmarried women faced many dilemmas. If a woman's lover chooses to take an active part in the child's upbringing, then the future of the woman and the child seemed a bit brighter. The woman might receive proper financial and emotional support from the child's father, which any mother needs to really be able to raise a child. The child would grow up with the support and love of both parents. Having

received such love and nurturing during its early years, the child will have a better chance to grow up as a mentally and emotionally stable person and contributing member of society.

If the father of the child does not take any responsibility for his child, the woman and the child face a bleak future on their own. This situation places a severe financial burden on the mother of the child. In addition, the social stigma of having a child out of wedlock in Greece often forces the woman and/or her family to engage in extreme behaviors. (e.g., hiding the child from the community in order to protect the family's reputation). In such a situation, the mother of the child finds herself caring for a child whose very existence is cloaked in secrecy. These pressures create ethical problems for the mother that may have psychological consequences for both the mother and the child. Many women end up turning to prostitution, without their families' knowledge, in order to raise money to care for their children. This in turn creates additional social problems, such as drug trafficking and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

The circumstances of the married women who came into the lab were slightly different. These women usually did not inform their husbands that their children had undergone DNA testing. If the results came back negative and the child's father was the woman's husband, then most women would say that they were going to forget that the affair had ever taken place. If the paternity results confirmed that the lover was the father, then the woman faced a new set of problems. Most of the time the lover did not want anything to do with the child and would be agreeable to the woman raising the child as if it were her husband's. However, if the man wanted to be a part of the child's life, then the situation had

to be acknowledged and the woman's husband and family would have to be notified. In these cases, one can imagine that the marriage might end in divorce, or, if the husband were loving and understanding, the other man might become an active presence in the child's life.

In retrospect, I find ethical problems with the fact that many of the husbands were unaware that the child they believed to be theirs was undergoing DNA testing. It seems to me that a man has a right to know about medical procedures performed on a child presumed to be his own. Even if the DNA tests proved that the child was not his, the father should still have the right to know about and even to refuse the testing. If the woman's husband is willing to treat the child as his, I do not think that anything should change if the tests showed the father of the child to be the lover and not the husband. Of course, others may argue against this stance since the biological father, if not the woman's husband, may want to share responsibility for or have custody of the child.

This entire testing procedure was tedious and arduous for all those involved. People waited for the results to arrive as if they were

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waiting for God to speak to them. The atmosphere of the lab was very tense and often very depressing. Women, grasping their children as if their lives were in danger, would simultaneously argue endlessly with the men who accompanied them.

Being part of the laboratory staff placed me in a unique and sometimes uncomfortable position, because I was a priest and celibate.

For one thing, people often believe that a celibate priest cannot possess any insights into the life of a married person and that he should never get involved in the concerns of couples. For another, many of my colleagues in the lab used to approach me for advice with their own personal problems. And further, a conversation about an entirely different matter would often lead into a kind of confession of how it feels to conduct tests that have such severe social consequences for those involved. Many of the students and other volunteers felt emotionally drained after having conducted these tests and delivered the results. Additional tension arose because some of my coworkers did not appreciate having a clergyman among them, and their animosity made the laboratory an extremely difficult work environment. There were many times when I would ask for assistance from volunteers who would simply ignore me.

My priestly status also affected many of the men and women who came in to be tested. Quite often, the women were reluctant to have me performing DNA tests on their children. I believe that they must have felt that I was condemning them for their actions. Another concern that they may have had was whether or not I was associated with one of their family members through the church community. They may have thought that I would announce the test results to their relatives.

My ordained status also contributed to the way some women would approach me with their problems with a sense of desperation. These were the women whose lovers wanted nothing to do with them or their child. They looked to me for an answer if everything else failed: if their would not take any responsibility for their children, then perhaps the Church would be a safe haven for them. These patients were the hardest to work with; those who did not want me to handle their case simply did not interact with me. These same women, on the other hand, seemed as if they were never going to leave the lab. Even after their testing was completed they would frantically yell and cry for help. Unfortunately, there was little that I could do for them at that

moment, as the restrictions that the laboratory placed on me required me to act more as a detached scientist and less as a caring priest in these situations.

The men who came in with the women were much more comfortable with my presence in the lab and were very respectful when speaking to me. They did not see anything wrong with their actions: in their eyes, it was natural for a man to have numerous sexual encounters, even with women who were already married. I believe that they truly felt guilty about the situation that had resulted, however, and thought that consenting to DNA testing was the least that they could do.

Most days in the laboratory were very routine. The laboratory would see approximately three or four cases per day. During my two months there, one case in particular stands out. One morning, two police officers escorted a woman into the lab along with three men, all three in handcuffs. I did not understand what was happening and thought that perhaps we had made a drastic mistake with the results of a test, that this woman was coming with her brothers or cousins to start trouble, and that the police had apprehended them before they had the chance. After one of the police officers presented an official government document to me, I understood the situation.

The woman, after having several sexual encounters with each of these three men, had become pregnant. She had decided not to abort the fetus, thinking that one of the men would eagerly take responsibility for the child. She eventually gave birth to her son. The only problem was she did not know which man was the father. None of the men wanted to deal with her or her child, and none wanted to take responsibility for the child. For the most part, contemporary society does not view having multiple sexual partners as problematic, but in this case, an ethical crisis arose. Despite every effort by the woman to get the men to volunteer to undergo the DNA tests, each turned his back on her. In such cases where the suspected father does not want to comply with the woman's request to undergo DNA testing, the government of Greece can force

him to be tested. The man has no recourse but to comply with the law or be placed under arrest. The police officers were basically making sure that all three men went through with the procedure. There were no measures that the laboratory could take to protect the rights of these men, because the lab itself is also subject to the laws of the government.

At first, this situation did not seem especially problematic to me, from an ethical standpoint. I felt that since the three men were responsible adults who willingly participated in sexual relations with this woman, they should be responsible enough to go through with the steps needed to support the life of the mother and her child. Issues regarding the violation of individual human rights and freedoms never crossed my mind until later. As a priest, I understood the value of the in-

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dividual and how important it is to treat everyone as an individual, but the relevance to this case did not occur to me at first. When I saw the young woman come into the laboratory with the three men, I really did think that the suspected fathers should have their rights suspended until they went through with the testing procedure.

The position of the Greek government in instances like this can be excused—or at least understood—when one not only sees the social and economic crises that may occur for the woman and her child, but also takes into consideration the medical threat that may arise when both parents of a child are not identified. For example, if the father is a carrier of some genetic disease, then there is a chance that the child may carry the defective trait or may even express the disease. If the child is a carrier and does not know it, then future generations may also inherit the defective gene. If genetic

information about the biological father can be accessed, then early therapy and treatment of disease in the child might be possible.

In addition, should the child ever need some type of transplant (e.g., bone marrow, kidney) in the future, often the father of the child is considered to be a potential donor, as well as the mother. If the family of the child at least knows the identity of the biological father, they can always attempt to elicit his cooperation. Also, if doctors are able to identify both parents, then they may be able to screen people in both of their immediate families for matches. Knowing the identity of both parents greatly increases the chances that the child will survive any potentially life-threatening medical problems and procedures.

One must question if this reasoning is adequate enough to warrant the violation of personal autonomy and individual human rights by the government in mandating genetic testing. Can one person's rights to autonomy be put aside in order that another person or group of persons may benefit? Are

the rights of the men to refuse a medical procedure in this situation less important than the right of the child and mother to know paternity? These questions did not cross my mind until later, when taking several bioethics courses taught from the interdisciplinary science-and-religion perspective. Having had previous experiences with bioethical issues, I now realize that if there were adequate standards in place, then violations of freedom and rights would not occur. If bioethicists can show that standards they propose do in fact look out for the general welfare of society and individuals, there is a chance that they can influence the creation of innovative laws that are applicable to a variety of situations (e.g., in biotechnology, medicine, and science, in general). Although as a Greek Orthodox priest, I continue to hold firmly to my faith, I have also learned that there are

many instances when theology can learn from both ethics and science. This is precisely one of those situations.

Respect for individual autonomy is an excuse that is widely used in today's medical ethics to allow euthanasia and/or physician-assisted suicide. However, through my bioethics studies, I believe that such procedures are not only unfair and dangerous for the in-

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dividual requesting them, but also dangerous for the rest of society. If the principle of autonomy prohibits procedures and actions considered ethical, such as providing medical aid when available to a sick person, then one must wonder what will happen when a person loses his or her autonomy.

Should experiments and medical procedures be performed on those whose autonomy has been taken away? Is such action not ethical? I believe that Greek law is wrong in this situation. Although the motivation behind this action is sincere, governmental infringement on individual rights sets a precedent for future violation of human rights and freedoms. If any government has the right to force someone to undergo a test without the proper legal trial or consent, then what will stop that government from forcing its citizens to undergo genetic screening to determine, for example, any predispositions to particular diseases or behaviors? Can secret testing be stopped if people do not have the right to refuse to undergo testing altogether? Individual autonomy must be a primary principle that is respected by individuals, governments, and other society-sanctioned organizations.

During the period of time I spent at the lab, I tried my best to relay the love of the

Christ toward all the patients and colleagues I worked with, while at the same time remaining focused on the fact that I was in a scientific environment that placed restrictions on my priestly role. I had to remind myself that even though I was a priest, at that moment I was also a clinical scientist and not able get too deeply involved in the patients' personal lives. I found it was very difficult to play both

of these roles simultaneously. Neither was avoidable; I could not stop being a priest, nor could I disengage myself from my scientific duties and responsibilities.

The impact that religion and religious figures play on science and scientific research is real. Since the time of Galileo and Copernicus,

science and religion have always confronted each other on key issues (e.g., evolution and creation). Only recently have the two tried to make an effort to see Truth in each other. From my experience in the laboratory, I realized that religion plays a vital role within scientific research that should never be eliminated. Science continues to make new discoveries every single day, yet people are not always able to comprehend many of these discoveries and their concomitant effects. Religious training enables a person to communicate important understanding of how these discoveries impact human lives. I believe that the theological training of clergy should train them to do this, and also that God bestows this gift upon the clergy. Scientific and technological discoveries can sometimes be hazardous to the well-being of God's people.

It is up to the pastor to develop this ability to the fullest and to use it in order to help, comfort, and explain the affects that science and technology have on the lives of parishioners. If I had been to provide this pastoral comfort and attention to even one of these patients, then the results that appeared on paper may not have seemed as frightening to them.

Religion has other important contributions to make to the scientific realm. There is always the fear that science will take its technology and its zeal for progress too far. The technology to perform amazing feats such as human cloning may be accessible to science, but one has to stop and wonder whether or not it is ethically or morally acceptable to pursue these activities. If one applies ethical and moral teachings from various religious groups, one may be able to devise a universal code of bioethical conduct. The knowledge and simplicity of the early fathers of the Church can provide modern science with the conscience that it lacks.

This past year has been truly an eye-opener for me. The science-and-religion courses as well as the various ethical courses that I have taken have revealed to me a differ-

ent manner of thinking. Although I am still a Greek Orthodox priest and continue to hold firmly to my faith's beliefs, dogmas, and traditions, I have also learned that there are many instances when theology can learn from both ethics and science. At the same time, any course in ethics reveals that science alone does not have all the answers to problems that daily confront humanity. The legal systems of most, if not all, countries are not ready to handle the swift pace of science. This is where the various other fields of study, such as theology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, are able to provide science and the judicial system with helpful perspectives on the issues at hand. When science, theology, and philosophy learn to hear and mutually respect each other's voices, then and only then can society continue to move forward.

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