

Disability and Bioethics: Moving Beyond Current Controversies
Adrienne Asch, PhD

Monday, March 6, 2006
4:00 pm - 6:00 pm

Columbia University
Broadway Room, Lerner Hall
2920 Broadway
New York, NY

The Center for Bioethics was pleased to co-sponsor an event with The Center for Disabilities Studies that featured one of the Center's External Advisory Board members, Adrienne Asch of Yeshiva University. Dr. Asch spoke on the relationship between bioethics and disabilities studies. She suggested that, as a discipline, bioethics is concerned with quality of life, and as such, defines people with disabilities as having a lower quality of life. Disabilities studies, on the other hand, ask whether the quality of life is lowered because of disabled bodies or because of the social arrangements that are available for disabled bodies.

Dr. Asch applied her theory to physician-assisted suicide to illustrate how disabilities studies can inform ethical thinking about a situation. According to the current law in the state of Oregon regarding physician assisted suicide, certain safeguards must be in place to ensure that a patient is not making the decision under duress, while depressed, or because of unmanaged pain. Disability advocates believe that additional safeguards are needed, like determining if the patient is receiving social support, whether they feel like they are or will be a financial, social, or psychological burden to their caregivers, or whether they have been exposed to others who live with their disability.

Another issue where bioethics and disabilities studies intersect is allocation of resources. Currently, allocation is implicit and discriminatory and needs to be made explicit. These changes are not possible in our current utilitarian framework where disability is equated with a lower quality of life. A better definition or understanding of disabilities will greatly aid the changes that need to be made. Some definitions of disability equate it with race or sex. According to other definitions disability is more like poverty because it is something that can and should be eliminated. Others frame disability as a legitimate form of human variation. The way we view disability affects the social structures that we set up, so Dr. Asch challenged us to critically consider the environment we are imagining for the future of disabled people.