

**Life and Death Decisions in the NICU**  
**Kristina Orfali, PhD**

December 9, 2005  
4:00 pm - 5:30 pm

Pharmacology Library  
Black Building, Suite 7-724  
650 West 168th Street  
New York, New York 10032

Dr. Kristina Orfali, who recently joined the Columbia University faculty as a researcher at the Institute for Social and Economic Policy, presented to an audience of nearly 70 her work on medical decision-making from a cross-cultural perspective. Dr. Orfali demonstrated how cross-cultural studies between America and Western Europe are rare because it is assumed that the two cultures are too similar (same Hippocratic and Judeo-Christian background; same Western philosophical background). She then demonstrated a need for such cross-cultural studies because important differences do exist, such as the emphasis on collective responsibility in Western Europe versus the greater emphasis on individual autonomy in the US. The research study she described demonstrated differences in how life and death decisions were made in the Neonatal Intensive Care Units in the US and France. In both countries, she interviewed doctors and parents treating infants who had a critical prognosis. The paternalistic model of health practice used in France suggested that doctors would offer medical certainty which was interpreted by the parents as moral certainty. Neither the doctors nor the parents in France felt they were confronting profound ethical dilemmas even when dealing with life-threatening situations. On the other hand, faced with similar situations, the autonomous model of health practice in the US meant that the physicians would present a more uncertain prognosis to allow parents greater decision-making power. Placing the burden of decision-making on the parents left them in moral jeopardy. Dr. Orfali concluded that this practice was more psychologically costly to parents, and served to protect physicians from litigation, from the burden of responsibility, and from being held accountable for the decision. Also, she noted that in France, physicians do not ask permission to stop treatment, whereas in the US, physicians do not ask permission to continue treatment. Although it seems like parents in the US are making more choices, how the choice is offered to parents is important. Dr. Orfali concluded her presentation by describing two more research projects that will continue her cross-cultural studies of medical decision making.

A copy of Dr. Orfali's publication describing her study can be found [here](#).

Dr. Orfali's Powerpoint presentation is available [here](#).