

Must We Always Tell the Truth? Integrity and Veracity in Research

The Columbia University Center for Bioethics Fourth Anniversary Lecture

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The Faculty Club
Columbia College of Physicians & Surgeons
630 West 168th Street, 4th Floor
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In the Center for Bioethics Fourth Anniversary Lecture, Northwestern University bioethicist Dr. Laurie Zoloth distilled the ethical implications of Dr. Woo-suk Hwang's fraudulent claim to have produced stem cells from cloned human embryos to "telling the truth" in life in general.

Weaving the personal with the political, she described herself as "from a family of liars" who were forced by historical circumstances to tell one made-up tale after another to save their lives from either Cossacks or Nazis. Zoloth came of age in the 1960's, identified as a Kantian, with a deep distrust of lying. High on the ideals of bioethics "I thought that the truth would set you free," she said, until she learned that truth-telling was just as likely to get one into trouble, as it did Zoloth when she was fired for telling the truth in a study she did for Kaiser Permanente.

Dr. Zoloth's personal sense of betrayal at Hwang's mendacity was very apparent in her talk: "I was taken in," she said point blank, describing her two meetings with him in Korea and the belief in him and his work these meetings generated. However, she noted the extreme pressure that Hwang was under to maintain the power and advantage of the lab, which involved an elite national university's reputation and Korea's image in the world.

Harm, however, can never be avoided in lying: the 'real' always asserts itself, as in the Hwang case; "You get found out, and your world crashes." Once trust is broken, it is nearly impossible to establish it again. Science is "a faith-based claim," Zoloth said, and we must always follow the Kantian imperative to tell the truth.

Dr. Zoloth also discussed the gray area regarding how the principle of beneficence trumps that of veracity when we lie with the best of intentions: when to tell the truth would destroy hope; to maintain peace in the family, or stability in the lab; to get needed information. And of course there is the placebo affect – and we know placebos do work.

In spite of this, she concluded that we should always tell the truth because it is necessary to know what is real. Bioethicists need the truth to evaluate complex moral issues. The public cannot make informed choices without the facts. Governments cannot make policy without knowing what is going on.