



Pat Wall, M.D.
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University of Tennessee Health Science Center
Memphis, TN 38163

3 March 2009

Dear Dr. Wall:

The American Society for Bioethics and Humanities (ASBH), the national professional association for scholarship, research, and teaching in medical ethics and humanities, strongly urges you not to eliminate the Department of Human Values and Ethics at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center. Abolishing it in accordance with the Dean's proposal could do your entire program irreparable harm.

Medical ethics is its own serious field of study, with a large scholarly literature and well-established standards of excellence. These standards require that teaching faculty possess appropriate qualifications, with a substantial track record of scholarly productivity in the field. It is not enough to say, "Our teaching faculty are good hearted. They'll teach the students to do the right thing." Nor is it good enough to hire one part-time ethicist to coordinate the training of the faculty so that they can coach students on the fly during clinical rotations. Ethics education is a crucial component of students' professional formation, and cannot be attained by cost-cutting measures such as these.

The Liaison Committee on Medical Education agrees. LCME requires that students receive ethics instruction in preclinical years, and formally during clinical rotations. The proposal, however, eliminates preclinical instruction and provides only informal teaching during clinical rotations. If it is implemented, the Medical School risks losing its accreditation, and we can all agree that this would be highly undesirable.

Equally undesirable would be to violate the tenure system by doing away with the Department on the plea of financial exigency, only to create another unit that serves a similar function but is staffed with untenured faculty. The violation is compounded by the plan to rehire, but on a part-time basis and stripped of tenure, one of the three members of the Department to be abolished.

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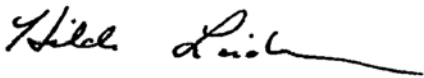
The cost-cutting formula by which the proposal to eliminate the Department of Human Values and Ethics was produced invokes the wrong set of standards for assessing the medical ethics faculty. Ethicists as such do not treat patients; moreover, funding for research in bioethics is very limited when compared to that available for medical research. For these reasons, productivity for ethics faculty cannot be measured by revenue generated for the medical school. It is measured, rather, by the amount and quality of scholarly publication and teaching.

Measured by those standards, the faculty of the Department of Human Values and Ethics are outstandingly productive. Every one of them has a highly distinguished academic record and international visibility in their field. They continue to be engaged and active scholars. They co-teach a required course for the first- and second-year students that has a major ethics component; conduct seminars for third-year students rotating through pediatrics and ob/gyn; and participate extensively in clinical teaching during regular patient-focused rounds and conferences for such departments as pediatrics, ob/gyn, and internal medicine. They also have a substantial involvement in teaching residents. The Department itself, one of the oldest in the country, enjoys enormous prestige both nationally and internationally. The work that is done there—and in particular, the research that is carried out there, has left an indelible mark on the entire field.

In the current economic climate, the pressure to reduce costs by cutting distinguished faculty is mounting, and because ethicists in particular do not generate much revenue for the school, they are tempting targets. We urge you to employ every means of resisting this temptation. We believe there are a number of ways that departments that teach bioethics can provide revenue generating efforts: conducting CME courses to teach in-state physicians medical ethics; offering ethics consultation services to health care organizations around the state that currently lack them, particularly rural programs; helping the university with fund raising events; offering public forums on topics of significant public interest.

Much is at stake here. We beg you to guard your school's deservedly fine reputation by energetically supporting, rather than abolishing, its highly valuable Department of Human Values and Ethics.

Sincerely,



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