

The Medicalization of Life

Paul Tournier, a name familiar to many, started a discussion group which calls itself: The Medicine of the Person Group. This group had their 46th international meeting in Belley, France this year. Their theme was, "The Medicalization of Life – an All Risks Insurance Policy".

I was privileged to participate with 60 people, mostly doctors, from Europe and the USA in the discussions around the topic. It was frightening to realise how we allow medicine to take over in almost all areas of life. I came to see the medicalization of life as both a blessing and a curse. Many of us present would not have been alive and taking part in the discussions were it not for sophisticated medical interventions.

Looking at the beginning of life illustrates it: rich countries are spending large sums of money to help very small babies to survive. These micronates have a high rate of subsequent disability which costs even more as they need specialised care, schools and workplaces. On the other hand, the same medical technology is being used to abort viable babies with no defect in some of the same countries. And at the end of life: medicine is trying hard to prevent death but at the same time euphemistically discussing "euthanasia".

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Medicalizing things certainly brings benefits, but with it comes new uncertainties and toxic effects. We need to say clearly to our patients that "Medicine is Risky", the hope is accompanied by an illusion. Medicine may give us longer life and deprive us of living at the same time. We cannot experience living without the pains of life. We need to live within the tensions between: Life and Death, Risk and Certainty, Joy and Sadness, Creativity and the Fear of it. We do not fear medicine enough to protect ourselves and our patients from being robbed of living. When we deny death we also deny life and kill time rather than live.

One of the French delegates summed up her views on the last day exclaiming, "we need an explosion of life: of liberty, of loving, of suffering, of joy, and more, and should not allow ourselves to be cheated out of this by the fear of many small deaths and the final death."

In December, we remind ourselves in many ways of the birth of Christ. He said that He came to bring life which is abundant to all who risk to follow Him. In the process He died a violent death. Last month, South Africa was shocked by the assassination of Johan Heyns, who lived until he died. He made a difference to our country, not by having no fear, but by doing what was right in spite of his fear.

The paper given by Richard Sosnowski, as one of the keynote addresses appears in this issue of SA Family Practice. Enjoy it: a Christmas gift of wisdom to help us practice medicine fit for today and tomorrow.

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