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THE ETHICS OF HEALTH CARE RATIONING:  
AN INTRODUCTION  
BY GREG BOGNAR AND IWAO HIROSE

ALANNA MCGOVERN<sup>1</sup>

The 2014 book *The Ethics of Health Care Rationing: An Introduction* by Greg Bognar and Iwao Hirose is an excellent discussion of the critical ethical issues raised in the rationing of health care.<sup>2</sup> Bognar and Hirose explain why health care is so complex, how the ethics of human nature play a major role in health care, and how ethics and health care are reconciled in today's modern health care systems. Bognar and Hirose use hypotheticals, discussion questions, and current examples from multiple countries to examine ethical considerations in the rationing of health care. Bognar and Hirose state that the "aim in this book is to show you that health care rationing not only *can* be ethical, but it *must* be" in order to show that the rationing of health care resources is "inevitable . . . ubiquitous," and "desirable."<sup>3</sup>

Various chapters explore valuing health, cost-effective analysis, problems of discrimination, aggregation of health benefits, and responsibility for health. In their examination of these subjects areas, the authors explain how that rationing is essential to have a successful health care system. Additionally, the authors explain how the invention of new technology does not solve the problems of rationing within health care systems.

Bognar and Hirose choose to open their book by using a hypothetical situation as the primary device to guide the reader through complex theories of health care rationing. By creating a fictitious scenario, the authors ask the reader to choose between options, and then reveal the consequences of the options, and why the one selection was better than another. At the outset, the authors fully engage the reader in the ethical and health care issues that arise. After introducing the hypothetical, the authors explain the real life scenario on which the hypothetical is based. By using this juxtaposition, the reader is able to appreciate the basic concepts of health care rationing, and how it plays out in the real world. This combination of hypotheticals and

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<sup>2</sup> GREG BOGNAR & IWAO HIROSE, *THE ETHICS OF HEALTH CARE RATIONING: AN INTRODUCTION* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 2.

actual health care decisions provides the reader with a clear connection between considerations in ethical rationing and rationing's practical effects.

In one such hypothetical, the authors ask you to imagine that you are part of a team of public health experts contracted to vaccinate children of a remote, tiny island against a fatal disease. There are 1,000 children on the island, 800 of which live on the coastal plains and 200 of which live in the remote mountains. It costs \$1 to vaccinate a child who lives on the coast, and \$4 to vaccinate a child who lives on the mountains, and you are given only \$800 for this work. Since you are unable to vaccinate all the children you are given a choice between (a) vaccinating every child living on the coastal plains but none of the children living in the mountains, or (b) vaccinating half of the children who live on the coastal plain and half of the children who live in the mountains.<sup>4</sup> After explaining the ramifications of the readers choice for either choice (a) or choice (b), the authors expand upon this hypothetical adding another \$800 for vaccinations and another disease; a disease like the first but only affects children, is fatal, and all children have the same chance of contracting it. By asking the reader to choose between two options yet again, the authors provoke deep thought about the complexity in rationing health care. Bognar and Hirose based this hypothetical on the World Health Organization's HIV and AIDS program that aimed to provide antiretroviral therapy to three million people with HIV/AIDS.

Within each chapter, in addition to thought provoking hypotheticals, the authors provide questions for further discussion and a chapter recap. Through research and careful explanation, *The Ethics of Health Care Rationing: An Introduction* does a wonderful job of explaining how health is not a natural quantity that can be measured on a common scale,<sup>5</sup> and how there is not the metric to compare different resource allocations.<sup>6</sup> The authors aim of "compel[ling] our readers to think about difficult real-life issues philosophically"<sup>7</sup> is certainly accomplished. Throughout the world, health care is an issue that affects every single person regardless of age, economic status, geographic location, or gender. However, many people do not understand the health care system, or the complex issues that arise on a daily basis. Many see the health care system as failing the common person, but do not realize the many mitigating factors surrounding health care

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 157.

rationing decisions. This book, though it cannot touch each and every issue surrounding health care rationing, does an exemplary job of beginning to explain this complex topic.