

Ethical Questions That We Never Had To Make in the Past

By Héctor José Huyke

(Based on the first series of articles in the Time magazine, “A Week in the Life of a Hospital”, Bob Sacha, October 12, 1998.

Cristóbal is six months old. His mother, who was addicted to cocaine and unemployed, gave birth when she was six months pregnant. Cristóbal was born weighing 1.5 pounds, now, at six months weighs 2 pounds. Twenty-five years ago, Cristóbal would have had 95% probability of dying. Now he has a greater probability of surviving because his mother chose a private medical research hospital in a developed country.

During his short life, the boy had various, very serious infections and health problems. Only with the help of the hospital's excellent medical group and equipment could he be kept alive until an intestine transplant could be done. Unfortunately, after the transplant Cristóbal died. If he had survived the infections, morphine, and transplant operation, he would have had to live in the hospital, between the intensive care unit and the operation room, for his entire first year. Cristóbal would have had a difficult early life which would have required highly expensive treatments. The final expenses for Cristóbal added up to \$192,500 of which Medicaid paid \$81,000 and the hospital absorbed the difference. If he had lived, a year in this hospital would have cost around \$1,000,000.

Without any doubt there are places where this child would have died at birth or shortly thereafter, because more than half of the hospitals in the world can't offer the basic services to the people that live near them. The work that the medical doctors in the hospital did for Cristóbal would have never been conceived of in an underdeveloped country because of the lack of basic equipment or resources, money and trained personnel.

Questions:

1. Was it worth while to try to save Cristóbal? Why or Why not?
2. Is it fair that people in developed countries can receive this kind of care while others in less developed countries can not? Why or Why not?
3. Should the developed countries do something to correct this inequality? What and why. (Take into account various aspects, such as: government interference or help, infrastructure, etc.)