Nazi Scientists and Ethics of Today

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**MINNEAPOLIS, May 19—**Nearly 50 years after Nazi scientists performed brutal experiments on Jews and gypsies in the concentration camps, scientists are still struggling with ethical questions over use of the Nazis' data.

But the debate has taken on a more urgent tone as scientists are faced with the dilemmas posed by the potential abuses of modern medical advances, like the ability to determine the sex or potential deformities in a fetus, artificial insemination and test-tube fertilization.

This urgency was behind a conference at the University of Minnesota this week in which about 200 scholars from the United States, Canada, West Germany, Denmark and Israel, along with several Holocaust victims, dealt with the ethical implications of the Holocaust, admittedly with great difficulty and emotion.

''You can't think about contemporary issues of medical ethics outside the shadow of the Holocaust,'' said Dr. Arthur Caplan, director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics at the University of Minnesota and the chief organizer of the conference. ''This is forcing people to confront the evil wrought by medicine.'' 'Children as a Commodity'

Scientists at the conference said genetic experiements now in progress may someday make it possible for parents to choose the height, eye color, intelligence level and the athletic ability of a child.

''In the future, you would be able to manufacture children, through genetic manipulation at the embryo level,'' said George Annas, a professor of health law at Boston University. ''You would not even have to bear the child. You could order embryos from a catalogue and have a surrogate mother bear it for you. This could lead to children being thought of as a commodity.''

Dr. Richard King, a medical geneticist at the University of Minnestoa, said, ''We have nothing in our background to tell us how to handle the information we're generating.''

Behind the discussions was the fear that without ethical guidelines there could be future scientfic abuses like those of the Nazi era, and the participants spent much of their time agonizing over how the data from the Nazi experiments should be used. Politics and Science

Dr. Jay Katz, a professor of law and medicine at the Yale University School of Law, said: ''This is not just a scientific judgment. It is foremost a political one. However hard we might try, we cannot separate the data from the way they were obtained.''

The conference focused on experiments in which the Nazis used hundreds of people to test human reaction to long-term exposure to extremes in cold temperatures, air pressure, toxic gases and other conditions, taking blood and urine samples while they monitored their subjects' deaths.

The results of those studies have been available to scholars since the data were discovered shortly after World War II. But in recent years several scientists who have sought to use the Nazi research have attracted controversy and stirred widespread soul-searching about the social responsibility and potential abuses of science. Scientists Voice Alarm

Last year, after nearly two dozen scientists voiced alarm, the Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of Nazi research in a study on phosgene gas conducted for the agency. About the same time, Dr. Robert Pozos, a physiologist, formerly of the University of Minnesota, whose specialization in the study of subnormal body temperature, or hypothermia, was the subject of extensive Nazi experimentation, ignited controversy when he began asking colleagues if it would be ethical for him to use the data.

Many of the Nazi experiments were aimed at protecting military personnel under various conditions but others were aimed at breeding a superior race.

The scientists expressed concern over benign acceptance of Nazi data in modern-day science and the occasional, matter-of-fact reference in contemporary scientific papers. ''Nazi data pops into footnotes and is absorbed without comment into mainstream science,'' Dr. Caplan said. ''That I find disturbing.''

While some participants said they wanted the data banned completely, most of the scholars were searching for moral and ethical guidelines concerning the data.

''Should we look at data apart from the atmosphere in which it was produced?'' Dr. Pozos asked. ''Is it ethical to use data gathered unethically? And if we're faced with this situation again, what are we going to do?'' 'Data Should Be Taboo'

For some the answer was clear. ''The data should be taboo,'' said Dr. Benno Muller-Hill, a molecular biologist and director of the Institute for Genetics at the University of Cologne in West Germany. ''We should remember those who died. We should not try to squeeze profit out of it.''

Some participants said that use of the data amounts to the victims' final indignity and could possible invite a duplication of the Nazi experiments. ''It's not data, it's a history of atrocities,'' said Eva Kor, a Holocaust victim, who was among the 1,500 pairs of twins who were the subjects of experiments by the Nazi physician Josef Mengele.

But others said it served no purpose to science to ignore data that could help people. ''We are talking of the use of the data, not participation in these heinous studies, not replication of atrocities,'' said Dr. Benjamin Freedman, a bioethicist at McGill University in Montreal. ''The wrongs perpetrated were monstrous; those wrongs are over and done. How could the provenance of the data serve to prohibit their use?'' Commemorating the Victims

Others said the data could be used to commemorate the victims. ''The question is not whether we should use the data, but how,'' said Dr. Robert Proctor, chair of the Science, Technology and Power program at the New School for Social Research. ''It should be used if the circumstances under which it was conducted are acknowledged and could be dedicated to the memory of the victims. It should not just say, 'For more on this topic, see Mengele, 1942.' ''

Dr. Velvl Greene, director of the Jakobovits Center for Jewish Medical Ethics at Ben Gurion University in Beersheba, Israel, argued that scientists could actually benefit from confronting the wrongs of the Nazi physicians. ''The need is to put the Holocaust and the Nazi experiments directly under the floodlight on center stage,'' Dr. Greene said, ''even if some of us and our past and present guilt are partly illuminated under the glare.''

While some of the scientists said that the Nazi experiments offered singular insights into human physiology, others questioned the validity of the experiments, saying they were poorly designed, could obviously not be tested or duplicated, were conducted on subjects who were weak and malnourished, and, therefore, are useless to modern science.

''I don't think lives hang in the balance,'' said Dr. Caplan. ''I think we can find out what we need to know from other sources. I'm convinced we know what we need to know.''

The subject brought pain and agony to many of the scholars, some of whom had lost relatives in the Holocaust, others who said they were at once intrigued and angered by the data. They came up with no conclusions, only more questions and a stronger thirst for answers.

1. What are the arguments for and against using the data from the Nazi experiments?

2. Which arguments seem more logical to you? Why?

3. Do you think the data from the Nazi experiments should be studied and used in modern medicine? Why or why not?