ROBERT MILLER
BUSINESS DAY

As we celebrate advances in scientific and medical research, an ever-increasing cadre of scientists is alerting us to the ethical consequences of those discoveries.

One such scientist — there are many in North Texas who is helping spearhead the joining of science and ethics is Dr. Fred Grinnell.

He is a professor of cell biology and neuroscience and director of the Program in Ethics in Science and Medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

The idea for the program came in the wake of “a three-day symposium about 2½ years ago that dealt with molecular genetics and medicine,” Dr. Grinnell said. “I was amazed at all the interest in a discussion of issues.

“Dr. John Sadler, professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern, a researcher and co-chairman of Parkland’s Ethics Committee, and I developed a program and submitted the proposal to [Dr.] Bill Neaves, dean of UT Southwestern Medical School at the time.”

“He took it to his advisory group, and they encouraged him to fund it.”

The first year, Dr. Grinnell said, there were four lectures, and the program set up a Web site.

By the second year, 1999, Dr. Grinnell had set up two nine-month programs that meet September through May.

“One is called Ethics Works-in-Progress, and the other is Ethics Grand Rounds, which is organized by Parkland Health and Hospital System and Dr. Grinnell’s Ethics in Science and Medicine program.

The Ethics Works-in-Progress program brings together an interdisciplinary group of individuals from the North Texas region who share humanities, health care and biomedical research interests,” Dr. Grinnell said.

“An example of a program is called Baylor University Medical Center, Harris Methodist Hospital of Fort Worth, Southern Methodist University, University of Dallas, UT Dallas and UT Southwestern.”

The Grand Rounds program, on the other hand, brings in experts from both here and across the country.

Some of the subjects and the discussion leaders in last year’s Ethics Works-in-Progress program included “Medical Mistakes or Errors” by Dr. Ide Smith of UT Southwestern; “Ethical Issues Encountered While Establishing the Birth Defects Research Center” by Dr. Angela Schuerle of the Texas Department of Health; “The Beleaguered Ruler: Public Obligations of the Professions” by Dr. William May of SMU; “Historical Perspective on Abortion” by Dr. Mort Prager of UT Southwestern; “The Right to Life and the End of Life” by Dr. Bob Fine of Baylor University Medical Center, “Science Fiction as a Source for Case Studies in Bioethics” by Dr. Edrie Sobstiy of UTD; and “Ethics of Human Gene Therapy” by Dr. Grinnell.

As you can see, what concerns you also concerns the scientific/ethics community.

High on the agenda

A few of the concerns on the agenda of the just-finished 1999/2000 and the upcoming 2000/2001 Grand Rounds involve:

“Should Ethic Standards and Procedures for Research be the Same in Developed and Developing Countries?” by Dr. Ruth Macklin of Albert Einstein College of Medicine; “Ethics and Genetics: The Next 100 Years” by Dr. Glenn McGee of the University of Pennsylvania; “The Ethical Gatekeeper in Managed Care: An Oxymoron?” by Dr. Howard Brody of Michigan State University.

“Treatment Refusal and Physician-Assisted Suicide” by Dr. Tom L. Beauchamp of Georgetown University; “Terminal Sedation” by Dr. J. Andrew Billings of Massachusetts General Hospital; “Reproductive Ethics” by Dr. Dan Brock of Brown University; “Pitfalls in the Corporatization of Health Care” by Dr. Ron J. Anderson of Parkland; and “Ethical Issues in the Human Genome Project” by Dr. Sara L. Tobin of Stanford University.

To make it most convenient for students, staff and faculty to attend, the lectures are held from noon to 1 p.m., during the lunch hour. They generally draw a crowd of more than 100, Dr. Grinnell said.

Currently, Dr. Grinnell estimates he devotes about 25 percent of his time at UT Southwestern to the Program in Ethics in Science and Medicine and the other 75 percent to his specialty of cell biology and neuroscience.

He attributed much of the program’s success to his former assistant Shanna Keck and his current assistant Dedra Burnam.

Though the ethics program is a relatively recent development, Dr. Grinnell’s interest in philosophy stretches back for years.

After arriving here as a post-doctoral fellow in 1970 and becoming an assistant professor two years later, he started taking courses in philosophy from Dr. Richard Zaner and Dr. David Hausmann at SMU, focusing on the philosophy of science and medicine.


“It’s been translated into Japanese.”

While Dr. Grinnell’s focus has in the past been on the issue of ethics across the board, he says his goal is to develop an ethics research program that focuses on issues in genetics.

“The very fundamentals of medicine are in transition,” he said.

Questions of family

Though there has been much politically driven humor of late in relation to such questions as “What do you mean by is?” such questions may increasingly be in order in this genetic age.

For instance, “You share your genes with other members of your family,” Dr. Grinnell said. “There are a lot of ethical issues with that.

“If you suffer from an incurable illness from a defective gene, should that information be passed on to other members of the family?”

“The second issue is what do you mean by disease, a word derived from dis-ease?” he said. “Who knew who was sick first in the old days? You.

“Then with the second level of physiology, your physician knows first when, for instance, he checks your blood pressure or makes other tests.

“With genetics, it tells you something before the physiology changes — or maybe it won’t.”

“With Huntington’s disease, as another example, you know the progyn will get the disease but you don’t know when or how severe.

“Most genetic diseases are risk factors — that means they just increase your likelihood of getting the disease, but they are not the only factor. There are other factors that are equally important,” Dr. Grinnell said.

So we are confronted with many issues that didn’t exist before.

Dr. Grinnell pointed out that a lot of genetic information doesn’t help you at present.

“For most genetic disease, there is no intervention right now, but that will change,” he said.

“Even when you get to intervention, it will be very risky” at the beginning.

For now, genetic engineering is different from real engineering because in real engineering, you know what all the parts are.
“With genetic engineering,” Dr. Grinnell said, “you only think you know what you’re doing.

“But what a lot of people don’t realize is that we know only 5 percent of all the DNA codes for the RNAs for making specific proteins.

“As for the other 95 percent of DNA, which perform other roles, there are a lot of ideas about what they do, but we still have a lot to learn.

“It’s astounding how far we’ve come, but there are a lot of surprises still to come.”

There are also cultural issues that present ethical challenges as the world shrinks before our eyes.

“Not every culture has the same view of death, birth and meaning of the individual,” he said. “If you come from a culture that has a different view of these things, you have different values."

Then, with a laugh that implied ethicists will never run out of issues, Dr. Grinnell said, “It’s an exciting era. There’s lots to do.”

Staff columnist Robert Miller writes about people and events of interest to the business community for The Dallas Morning News.

Dr. Fred Grinnell (left) is director of the ethics program at UT Southwestern Medical Center, assisted by Drs. Jeff Bishop (center), an assistant professor of internal medicine and ethics, and Tom Mayo, adjunct associate professor of internal medicine.