Introduction

A Modern Version of an Ancient Question

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A colleague's report from Japan poses a very modern version of an ancient question for physicians: the extent of the professional obligation to risk one's personal health or safety in the service of patients' medical needs. With remarkable candor, Dr. Akira Akabayashi acknowledges that he responded to a colleague's request for his ethical opinion on this question from the relative safety of Tokyo, when the question involved the professional commitment of a physician just outside the official 20-kilometer evacuation zone surrounding the damaged nuclear reactors at Fukushima. His commentary has a vividness that approaches the drama of real-time deliberations and ends with a note of uncertainty.

The uncertainty mirrors the history of the profession's encounter with this question, as Abigail Zuger and Steven Miles have demonstrated in their 1987 article in *JAMA*, "Physicians, AIDS, and Occupational Risk: Historic Traditions and Ethical Obligations."[1] Noting that Galen himself admitted fleeing Rome to escape an outbreak of plague in 166 AD, Zuger and Miles trace professional ambivalence and the nearly complete absence of ethical reflection in the settings of the Black Death during the fourteenth century, London's Great Plague of 1665, and the yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793. At their time of writing, Zuger and Miles were primarily concerned with the possible foundations for a physician ethic of responsibility for the care of patients with AIDS, and they emphasized the considerable gap in the (typically minimal) level of risk posed to most physicians by AIDS compared to the outbreaks of plague and yellow fever that cost many, many physicians their lives. Nevertheless, their survey is helpful in placing Dr. Akabayashi's article in a historical context that extends far earlier than the outbreak of SARS, to which Dr. Akabayashi turns in a search for reflection and precedent.

We would like to extend to our readers an invitation to respond in future issues of the *CQ* Professionalism section to the questions Dr. Akabayashi has posed, and that, as he suggests, continue to present challenges for bioethicists.

Note

1. Zuger A, Miles S. Physicians, AIDS, and occupational risk: Historic traditions and ethical obligations. *JAMA* 1987 Oct 9;258(14):1924–9.

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