

RU 486, Medical Progress, and Wisdom

Scientific positivism, with its disdain for metaphysics and theology, is not just the stuff of fiction like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Goethe's *Faust*; history proves that it is a perennial temptation in all advances in science or in medicine. As a guard against the dehumanization inherent in scientific progress emancipated from conscience, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council insist that human development be allied to the moral law: "Our age more than any of the past needs such wisdom if all that man discovers is to be ennobled through human effort" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #15).

The advent of RU 486 not only provides us with a current example of what has been hailed as medical progress but, owing to the controversial use of the drug, it also gives us an opportunity to discuss whether this particular medical advance is in accord with true wisdom, that is, with the Divine Law. This article will approach the discussion by, first, giving a brief fact sheet about the development and manufacture of RU 486, second, drawing up a basic Christian moral framework against which one can evaluate all scientific or human progress and, third, applying these basic moral principles and values to the development, manufacture, or use of the drug RU 486.

The Advent of RU 486

Dr. Etienne-Emile Baulieu of Hospital Bicetre (Bicetre, France) developed the progesterone antagonist RU 486 (mifepristone). The drug, a synthetic 19-norsteroid, suppresses the normal progesterone activity of preparing the uterine lining to accept and sustain implantation of the embryo. Consequently, when a pregnant woman uses RU 486 in combination with an injection of prostaglandin, her uterus contracts and sloughs off the fetus. In 1986, Dr. Baulieu and some of his colleagues concluded that "RU 486 appears to be an efficient and safe agent for termination of early pregnancy." At that time, the abortive drug, presented as "a reasonable alternative to surgical abortion" was proven to be 85% effective (*New England Journal of Medicine*, "Termination of Early

Pregnancy. . .", December 18, 1986, p. 1569). As of 1989, its effectiveness is estimated at 96% when used in conjunction with a prostaglandin injection in the first 9 weeks of pregnancy (See *Science*, "The Pill of Choice?", 22 Sept., 1989, p. 245).

Recently, the American medical community recognized Baulieu's work in the development of RU 486 as well as his earlier work in hormones. On October 3, 1989, at an American Medical Association Conference at the Texas Medical Center, Dr. Michael De Bakey presented Baulieu with the prestigious Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award. (See *Houston Post*, "Creator of abortion drug . . .", October 4, 1989, p. A-18)

The pharmaceutical company responsible for the manufacture of RU 486 is Roussel-UCLAF of Paris. When this company originally introduced the drug in France, a surge of pro-life protests, including a threatened boycott of products made by Roussel's West German company, forced the French pharmaceutical company to withdraw the pill from the market only one month after its introduction. However, on October 28, 1989, the French Minister of Health reintroduced the pill, and it has remained on the market ever since.

The drug has been licensed for use in China and has been recommended by the Bombay Council for Medical Research for use in India. Despite protests from British pro-life organizations, RU 486's projected availability date in Britain is 1991. The Roussel Company also has its eye on the U.S. market. Although opposition to the drug is intense, experi-

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ments with the drug in the U.S. are already being conducted. It is estimated, however, that it will be several years before the Federal Drug Administration would give its final approval. It is predicted that Eastern bloc countries, where abortion is the most frequent form of contraception, will provide Roussel with a sizeable market for their product.

Before we evaluate the development and manufacture of RU 486 from a moral perspective, we need to uncover, as a necessary point of comparison, the rationale that prompted the creation and marketing of the drug. At the Lasker Award event, Baulieu said that his principal objectives for developing RU 486 were "to give people a choice as well as relieve suffering" (that is, of the women who lose their lives due to poorly executed abortions) (*Houston Post*, October 4, 1989, p. A-18). Although it is impossible to know all the reasons why Roussel-UCLAF manufactures the drug, it is instructive to note the following remark made after Roussel weathered the initial boycotts: "Pharmaceutical analysts said Roussel's resolve may be strengthened by the profits it would make if the drug were more widely available" (*Houston Post*, November 12, 1989, p. A-17).

Moral Evaluation: General Principles

To what moral guidelines are health care related professions such as medical research scientists and pharmaceutical companies subject? The answer is quite simple. Scientists who develop medical drugs and pharmaceutical companies who manufacture and market them are subject to the same moral norms as are the people who use the drugs, the doctors who prescribe them, or the government agencies who approve them. They are subject to the principles and norms which John Paul II has described as a "moral understanding" of human progress. If medical and scientific progress is to be authentic, then it must orient itself "toward the true good of the human race" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, p. 48).

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explains that the only sure way one can know the "true good of the human race" is through an adequate understanding of the nature of Man. The *purpose and limits* of science and technology are, in fact, defined by the full truth of the human person and human moral values (See *The Vatican Instruction*, (1987), Introduction, 2). In other words, an adequate understanding of the human person aids scientific progress in the recognition of its *raison d'être* and its moral parameters. Human progress, then, if it is to be grounded in objective morality, must be in accord with the following anthropological truths and moral values: The human person is a body/soul unity who, because of his origin and destiny in God, possesses an innate dignity or sacredness which gives rise to his

purpose, rights, and duties. The responsibility of all aspects of society, including political, medical, and legal structures is to foster each person's pursuit of perfection and human fulfillment by promoting the moral law manifested in love of God and love of neighbor.

Practical Implications

Dr. Baulieu and Roussel-UCLAF must not be satisfied with constructing a justification for RU 486 based solely on morally ambiguous consequences such as providing a choice, preventing deaths from botched abortions, or making a profit. Medical science with a conscience demands that both the scientist and the pharmaceutical industry squarely confront the primary use of RU 486 and the moral reality of what happens when a woman uses the drug for that purpose.

As Baulieu indicates, the principal use of RU 486 is to terminate an early pregnancy. But describing the effect of RU 486 as Baulieu and colleagues do, that is, as "termination of early pregnancy" or "uterine evacuation" or "the passage of products of conception" (see *NEJM*, op. cit.) obscures the moral reality of the effects of an abortifacient like RU 486. The questions essential to any moral evaluation of the drug are these: *What* is being terminated, *what* once filled the uterus, and *what* is the result of a human conception? Biology tells us the answer: human life. From the time of the completion of fertilization there is present all the necessary genetic material of the new human being whose *life* has now been conceived. Immediately following fertilization, this newly conceived human life begins its dramatic process of development and maturation.

In conclusion, then, we see that medical scientists and pharmaceutical companies are called to respect the inherent dignity of the human person by promoting the human goods of life and health. They can also assist persons in making morally good choices in their pursuit of these two human goods by providing morally acceptable options. In direct contrast to that noble vocation, we see that the use of RU 486, first, violates the moral law as manifested in the love of God by disregarding God's plan for the absolute inviolability of innocent human life and, second, violates the moral law as manifested in the love of neighbor by facilitating a woman's opportunity to have a completely privatized abortion. Since the use of RU 486 fails to honor the *true* good of women or preborn human beings, the development and manufacture of RU 486 are not allied to wisdom, and the continued manufacture and promotion of it, or of any drug with a similar purpose, are ethically unacceptable.

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