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## Where do we draw the line? Taboos in medicine through time

### ABSTRACT

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A white paper with four straight edges, something you can find in any office. Sharply defined and easily comprehensible. But how about something more complicated like a human being, medicine, society. We are in the era where these three words have come closer to each other than ever before. Medicine is being pushed to the limit and while it produces some startling and lifesaving answers, it also opposes us with a lot of hard questions. Have you ever walked the streets of your town encounterig a person and wondering whether it was a he or a she or were equally surprised by their appearance? (Change of sex, cosmetic surgery). Are we humans really so selfish that we exploit others for their organs, when on the other hand we are not willing to donate ours? (Transplantation). What is a doctor really, a god or merely a human? (Artificial insemination). Are we still adopting because we cannot conceive a child and wish one or is it more because it's the trend? (Adoption). We are forced to think anew who we are, who the people around us are and where the truth lies hidden. This presentation will try to push you to the limit and confront you with some of the questions we face in the 21st century medicine.

**Key words:** taboos in medicine, sex change, cosmetic surgery, transplantation, artificial insemination, adoption

### Introduction

A white paper with four straight edges is something you can find in any office, something what is sharply defined and easily comprehensible. But how about something more complicated like a human being, medicine, society. We are in the era where these three words have come closer to each other than ever before. Medicine has been and is being pushed to the limit and while it produces some startling, revolutionary and lifesaving answers, it also opposes us with a whole lot of

hard questions. We are forced to think anew who we are, who the people around us are and where the truth lies hidden. In this article we will confront some of the questions we face in the 21st century medicine. The themes are: cosmetic surgery, change of sex, adoption, artificial insemination and transplantation.

A simple question: "Who am I?". We all think we know the answer. But do we?

## Cosmetic surgery

Plastic surgery has a very long history but it was not until the first Great War that it truly started to bloom. Doctors were dealing with patients that had horrific wounds and needed immediate and long term treatment, so they were forced to learn new and good techniques. New knowledge was born. After the Second World War the Cold war for democracy started. And here we are in the 21. St. Democracy is at its limit. We all have the right to do almost anything.

Have you ever walked down the streets of your town and encountered a person you wondered about whether it was a "he" or a "she" or were equally surprised by their appearance? Of course we are unique, each person in its own way, but does that give us the right to change who we are? What is a personal decision and what is purely a society's influence? What should be encouraged by medicine and what not?

Maybe the biggest influence can be seen in the way we look at beauty. Are the global brands creating the modern women and men? Is the pressure of the ideal woman so powerful that women all over the world succumb to it? Bigger breasts, fuller lips, fewer wrinkles ... Can medicine make you beautiful?

But plastic surgery can also save lives. Breast cancer, for example, after many treatments and surgeries any woman is happy to be still alive, but she also expects and deserves to be able to go back in to her life, like she never had a disease in the first place. Another example is Dallas Wiens whose face got burned by high voltage



*Figure 1: Dallas Wiens before and after his face transplant; Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/05/09/face.transplant.boston/> (7. April 2014.)*

electricity. With the help of plastic surgeons and other medical staff some of his life quality was regained with a complex face transplant. (1)

## Sex change

Through the history, perspective on sex change and gender itself changed a lot. Once, the crippled were source of astonishment and mockery in travelling circuses. At the climax of baroque, society yearned more than ever for high (soprano) voices of castrated boys on stage, where women were not welcome. These may not be concealed ideas about sex change were encouraged so. (6) After Baroque's castration died away and along with it all ideas and approval of sex change. With the prosperity of esthetic surgery and democracy in twentieth century, freethinking movements and individuals started to develop. They put to the test the limits of social approval and successfully transcended them.

We are nowadays confronted with many marketing tricks. A special branch of fashion presents to us so called *androgynous models*. When you look at them, they cause astonishment and confusion. You gaze at the product and at the body that is selling it, not knowing what to think of it. In term this is good for the designers and sellers, because they have achieved their goal to have your full attention.



Figure 2: Andrej Pejić – androgynous model; Source: <http://reallifeiselsewhere.blogspot.com/2013/05/liberdade-de-escolha.html> (7. April 2014.)

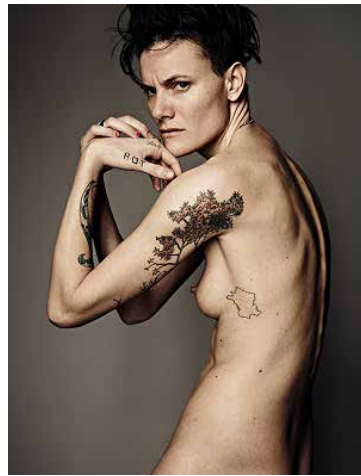


Figure 3: Casey Legler – androgynous model; Source: <http://reallifeiselsewhere.blogspot.com/2013/05/liberdade-de-escolha.html> (7. April 2014.)



*Figure 4 : Thomas Beatie; Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/31/pregnant-man-new-photos-r\\_n\\_94250.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/31/pregnant-man-new-photos-r_n_94250.html), (7. April 2014.)*

Can a man get pregnant? Yes he can. How? Thomas Beatie had a hormone treatment and surgeries, and is now officially a male, but his gonads were not removed so he can still have children.

Are these personal decisions or mental disorders caused by a bad parent - child relationship?

### **Artificial insemination**

Artificial insemination has its roots in the Arab culture. They inseminated their horses with the sperm of enemy's stallions already back in the 14. St. (5)

Who or what is God? An omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent entity? Someone who can decide over life, death, fate...? God has all decisions. Who or what is a doctor? A person, who helps, makes crucial decisions and has great knowledge and power. But does he know how to use it?

In vitro fertilization is the most drastic measure to be taken when a child cannot be conceived. Very carefully an egg cell and a sperm are selected and put together in a controlled environment, and with a little luck a child is born approximately nine



*Figure 5: In vitro fertilization;  
Source: <http://static.ddmcdn.com/gif/in-vitro-fertilization-2.jpg>,  
(7. April 2014.)*

months later. One happy family more, what is wrong with that? Every born child is a wonder, different from others. But what if a slightly abnormal egg cell or sperm, which we would declare for “useless”, could still manage to develop a child? Maybe not perfectly normal, but still not something we can just put aside. Are now doctors gods that can decide over who will live and who will not, what is normal and what abnormal?

## Transplantations

First rumors of transplantations being executed appeared in Ancient Greek, Roman and Chinese myths featuring fanciful accounts of transplantation being performed by gods and healers. First actual transplantation was performed by Italian surgeon Gasparo Tagliacozzi, sometimes known as the father of plastic surgery. He reconstructed noses and ears using skin from patients’ arms in 16th Century. In Early 1900s European doctors attempted to save patients dying of renal failure by transplanting kidneys from various animals, including monkeys, pigs and goats. First human kidney was later transplanted in 1936 by Ukrainian Doctor Yu Yu Voronoy, using an organ from a deceased donor. The recipient died shortly thereafter as a result of rejection. First successful transplantation of internal organ happened in 1954 when surgeons transplanted a kidney from 23-year-old Ronald Herrick into his twin brother Richard; since donor and recipient were genetically identical, the procedure succeeded. In 1960s the first successful lung, pancreas and liver transplants took place. In 1967, the world marveled when South African surgeon Christiaan Barnard replaced the diseased heart of dentist Louis Washkansky with that of a young accident victim. Although immunosuppressive drugs prevented rejection, Washkansky died of pneumonia 18 days later. Till today, many different transplantations were executed, the latest novel one being entire face transplant as an urgent life-saving surgery performed in 2013 in Poland. (4)



*Figure 6: India organ trafficking; Source: <http://news.upickreviews.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/india-organ-trafficking.jpg> (7. April 2014.)*

Nowadays we can hear horrific thing being said in the street like: "Looking to make some extra cash? Sell your internal organs!" and "Ufff, I've been waiting too long for a kidney transplant. My family and I are going to a less developed country, where we have found a private surgeon who will, for a certain amount of money, get me a new kidney. I don't know where and I don't even care who it is from, as long as I can continue to live." Where is this happening? Who is buying and who is selling? Who is transplanting? Why are being people killed and their organs sold? We are prepared to do anything to save our lives: buy, accept and even kill. Are we humans really so selfish that we exploit others for their organs, when on the other hand we are not willing to donate ours for saving lives of others? Transplantations are saving lives! We should erase this selfish way of living, stand strong and end the misery that transplantations in certain circumstances can cause all around the world.

## Adoption

The "style" of adopting has changed very much through history. In Ancient times, adoptions were made to secure oneself political status and power. Many laws that were written in the following eras, like "the English Common Law", prohibits adoptions because they were in discordance with fundamental rules of family heritage. Thus wealthy people eventually stopped adopting children and their role was taken over by Church, which started investing in different kinds of institutes and shelters for orphaned children. These institutions have borne till today. Consequently in America substantial increase of children in urban cities was marked, which therefore led to the transport of such children to rural areas, where they were sold and used as labor resource. In transition to the second half of the twentieth century, adopting has again gained in popularity, but somehow families tried to conceal the very fact of adopting a child. In 1960s and 1970s number of adoptions decreased because contraceptive pills were discovered. (2)

Nowadays infertility is becoming a serious problem in which modern medicine takes great interest, but still does not fulfill our needs and therefore many couples still decide for child adoptions. Adoptions are in present days strictly regulated and many of the children find nice and warm surroundings. Too many times nowadays adoptions are just a stepping in stone on someone's path to fame or just staying that way, admiration, media attention, questionable charity... In some strange way all this resembles to selfish philosophy of Ancient Greeks.

Everyone has a television, we go to the cinema and on every corner you can see a poster trying to convince you to buy something. They have strong influence that has fully entered our everyday life and has a great impact on the decisions we make. As

mentioned, this is a problem when looking at ourselves and others, but what about child adoption. Are we still adopting children because we cannot conceive a child and wish one, or is it more because it is cool to adopt a child? It is even better if it is from a less developed country so that we can boast with what a noble thing we have done, making ourselves the saviors of the poor.

Democracy - a Greek invention. An ideology based on equality and freedom. But with it came even greater differences that we can now observe in less developed countries only because we always want more. Where do children find their place. You probably know Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. They adopted three children, saved them from the horrors of less developed countries. (3) Such a heroic act! But are they really that great? Who cares for these children when they are off shooting world renowned films? What do children really need? Fame and fortune? Should they really be taken from Africa to those all so perfect parents? And are we copying this model and adopting children like Hollywood stars do, just because we want to stand out, show off with our grateful deed? Or we only want to have that 'exotic child' similar to the obsession some people have with collecting rare objects?

The goal of medicine is to improve or save someone's life. But what is improvement, where is the limit, where should we say STOP – this is it for me – here I draw my line!

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## Gdje povlačimo granicu? Tabui u medicini kroz vrijeme

### SAŽETAK

Bijeli papir s četiri ravna ruba, nešto što se može naći u bilo kojem uredu. Oštro definiran i lako razumljiv. Ali kako razumjeti nešto što je kompliciranije kao što je ljudsko biće, medicina, društvo? U razdoblju smo u kojem su se ove tri riječi približile više nego ikad prije. Medicina je gurnuta do krajnjih granica i dok stvara neke zapanjujuće i za spašavanje života ključne odgovore, suočava nas i s puno teških pitanja. Jeste li ikada hodali ulicama vašeg grada i susreli osobu pitajući se je li ona ili on, ili bili jednako iznenađeni njezinim izgledom? (promjene spola, estetska kirurgija). Jesmo li kao ljudi doista toliko sebični da smo u stanju iskoristiti druge samo zbog njihovih organa, a s druge strane nismo voljni donirati naše? (Transplantacija). Što je liječnik uistinu, Bog ili samo čovjek? (Umjetna oplodnja). Je li još uvijek posvajamo djecu jer ne možemo začeti dijete ili zato što je trend posvojiti dijete? (Posvajanje). Prisiljeni smo iznova razmišljati tko smo, tko su ljudi oko nas i gdje istina leži skrivena. Ovaj rad će nas pokušati gurnuti do granica i suočiti nas s nekim pitanjima s kojima se suočavamo u medicini 21. stoljeća.

**Ključne riječi:** tabui u medicini, promjena spola, plastična kirurgija, transplantacija, umjetna oplodnja, posvajanje