

## News from the Field

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nationwide to screen potential new patients to determine if they've ever filed a malpractice lawsuit has closed its doors in the face of public outcry. The web site, DoctorsKnow.Us, had been in operation since November 2003 and billed itself as a "physician designed, owned and operated" company that could help a physician with the risk management aspect of their business. It closed on March 9.

Doctors, clinics, hospitals, and insurance companies had all been courted by the web site which stated that "defensive medicine is becoming the norm as a means of fending off potential malpractice cases." For a mere \$4.95 a month (for up to 250 searches) or \$7.50 a month (for constant monitoring of up to 250 existing patients), members of the medical community could determine if someone had filed a malpractice lawsuit, been a plaintiff attorney, or served as an expert witness for a plaintiff.

After a story in the *New York Times* quoted the site's motto, "They can sue, but they can't hide," the site replaced the motto with the statement, "National Plaintiff Database. This is not a blacklist. Many patients have meritorious cases." However, search results only offered basic case information such as where a case was filed, a filing date, and a statement of current status—nothing that indicated the merit of the claim. Less than a week after the story was published, the site shut down.

### Is "Parachute Research" Ethical?

Pharmaceutical and biotech companies looking for ways to reduce costs of required clinical trials of new drugs and medical treatments are beginning to turn their attention overseas.

Referred to as "parachute research" by Dr. Lawrence Gostin, director of the Center for Law and the Public's Health at Georgetown and Johns Hopkins Universities, the term refers to the practice of a company going into a poor foreign country, often in Eastern or Central Europe, performing clinical trials, and then leaving without making the drug available to other poor, sick residents.

Some people argue that the poor in these countries are at least receiving some benefit that they wouldn't otherwise have. Others say the practice is exploitation of the poor for shareholder profit. Companies who are beginning to do research overseas are currently struggling with the question of what they are ethically required to do for the citizens who willingly take the risk to prove a treatment's safety and efficacy. Look for the debate to continue as this practice continues to rise. ■



## A Review of the Book *The Blank State: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*

(by Steven Pinker; New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002; 509 pages)

Shari Falkenheimer, M.D., M.P.H., President, Bioethics & Medicine, Inc. (San Antonio, Texas)

Although no ally of believers in the God of the Bible, Steven Pinker, in his book *The Blank Slate*, is also clearly at odds with the triple mantra of contemporary social science, modernism, and post-modern philosophy. This so-called "Holy Trinity," which arose out of the Enlightenment, regards the newborn human being as a "Blank Slate" without inborn limitations or inequalities. It also espouses concepts such as "the Noble Savage," who is good, happy, and at peace until corrupted by the outside world, and "the Ghost in the Machine," Pinker's term for the soul (or inner, eternal, conscious, non-material essence), of which he denies the existence. A recognized expert in cognition and language who taught for 21 years at MIT before moving to Harvard, Pinker here summarizes vast areas of research in biology, cognition, genetics, and the humanities and the social sciences to demonstrate that the dictates of the "Holy Trinity" are not only untenable, but harmful.

In doing so, Pinker describes how the concepts of the "Blank Slate," "the Noble Savage," and "the Ghost in the Machine" became dominant in intellectual circles and how research increasingly calls each into question. He then explains why the concept of a "human nature,"—in which each individual is born with specific and unequal gifts, talents, and abilities—is strongly resisted by the scholarly world. Pinker next identifies four fears surrounding the potential loss of the "Holy Trinity" of beliefs, each of which threatens one or more dearly held public policy positions.

First, secular arguments for human equality have been based on the concept of the "Blank Slate"; if this concept is nullified, discrimination might be justifiable. Second, if the assumption (stemming from the notion of "the Noble Savage") that what is natural is good is demonstrated to be untrue, the ideals of moral progress and perfectibility might be cast aside as people recognize that human beings are innately immoral. The last two fears are that, if human capabilities and behaviors are biologically determined by the brain without being influenced by a supernatural soul, individuals and society will judge that people have no truly free will or responsibility for their actions, nor a higher purpose or meaning to their lives. Pinker addresses each of these fears in turn to show that the logic behind each assumption is wrong. He further asserts that denying the essence of human nature can be more dangerous than accepting it, since it leads to false conclusions and ineffective public policy.

Pinker then shifts his focus to several "hot buttons" (issues of politics, violence, gender, children/education, and the arts) in an attempt to find common ground, based on empirical evidence. Unlike those on the extreme "left" or the "right," Pinker seeks a balance that would accommodate positions held by both sides. For example, he forcefully argues that, while much of the variance in certain traits and behaviors of individuals is biologically or genetically determined, much of this variance is not determined this way; thus, neither extreme determinism nor extreme environmental behaviorism is valid. Pinker concludes by describing how rejection of the "Blank Slate" hypothesis need not have the extreme effect on society and social policy that many fear. He supports his arguments by citing nearly 30 pages of publications.

In defending the view that human beings have different gifts but that all of humanity is inherently flawed, *The Blank Slate* has much to offer Christian ethicists. However, the author forcefully decries both the Christian and intelligent design explanations for human nature. Although raised in a Canadian Jewish community, Pinker is an atheist who strongly supports the theory of evolution. The book's greatest flaws are that Pinker dismisses intelligent design without serious examination, and that he fails to see that his evolutionary interpretations of empirical findings about human beings are just as philosophical/scientifically unfalsifiable as is Judeo-Christian belief. ■