Jason Newland: Good morning Children’s Mercy! Welcome to another edition of our weekly podcast. I’m Jason Newland, medical director of patient safety and I will be your host. Today I’m joined by probably one of the most esteemed members of our pediatric faculty, Dr. John Lantos, who is the director of the Children’s Mercy Bioethics Center. Welcome John.

John Lantos: Good to be here.

JN: It’s really interesting to have a bioethicists and this bioethics center. What led Children’s Mercy to do this? What led you to be in this position? You have a long history of doing a lot of things, so I’d like to hear your story and what got you to this point.

JL: Children’s Mercy was only the second children’s hospital in the U.S. to start a bioethics center; Seattle Children’s was the first one. There are a few others now. I think the impulse to start the center came from maybe three different things. One – Rand O’Donnell has always been concerned about health policy, and one of the things bioethicists do is think about policy, access to care, health disparities and those sorts of things.

Second thing we do is clinical ethics problems. So when doctors have cases that raise complicated ethical issues, whether they’re issues of when to end life or child’s best interest or other things that arise in clinical practice, sometimes they consult a bioethicists to ask, “What is the right thing to do for this child?”

The third thing is research, and that has two aspects; one is the ethics of doing research; the other is to do research about ethics. So that for issues like vaccine mandates for example, or growth hormones for short kids, or whole genome sequencing in newborns, we do research and collaborate with the clinicians.

JN: John, what led you to get into this field? Because my understanding is your background is as a general pediatrician.

JL: I am a general pediatrician. I first got interested in bioethics when I was a resident in Washington, D.C., in the early 80s and the Baby Doe controversy. Our hospital, because we were in D.C., became the plaintiff in the case that challenged the Baby Doe regulations. I was working in the NICU and our neonatologists were meeting with C. Everett Koop who was the surgeon general and it was all happening right there, so I became fascinated with ethical issues in the neonatal intensive care unit. That led to a career in bioethics.

JN: And you came to Kansas City, if I recall, because I remember meeting you, and it wasn’t initially to be at Children’s Mercy; didn’t you come to be here at this ethics center, or philosophical center?

JL: Sure. After residency and a couple of years in the National Health Service Corps, I went to Chicago and did a fellowship at the University of Chicago in ethics, and then stayed there for 20 years. I first came to Kansas City to take the John B. Francis Chair at the Center for Practical Bioethics, that is a nationally renowned bioethics think-tank located downtown, and spent a couple of years working with them and the folks in Chicago trying to figure out whether that sort of “grass roots” approach to bioethics was what I wanted to do. Turned out I missed the kids, missed working in pediatrics, and started looking for ways to get back, and Children’s Mercy was looking to start a bioethics center, so we found each other, and so far have lived happily ever after.
JN: That’s right! I was always fascinated by that because I don’t think people would even know that here you are in the heart of America and one of these major think-tanks for bioethics is right here.

JL: Yes. It was started by a woman named Myra Christopher who became passionately involved after her mother’s death, when she was upset at the end-of-life care that the elderly received. So she built the Center for Practical Bioethics, formerly the Midwest Bioethics Center, into an organization that helps change end-of-life care mostly for adults, but with some pediatric focus.

The issues in kids are wildly different because most kids aren’t sick and most kids of course don’t die, thank God, and the ethical issues are usually rare and a bit esoteric.

JN: Right. Now you mention these three focuses that the Center of Bioethics works on here; how many do you have in your group who help work on these issues?

JL: Great question. We have a very small paid staff. We have a full-time Philosopher, a young man named Jeremy Garrett who got his PhD in moral philosophy at Rice University. We recruited Brian Carter, a neonatologist and national leader in pediatric palliative care, Diane Plantz who is an ER doctor who got her master’s in bioethics, runs our bioethics certificate program – which I’ll tell you more about in a minute – and starting January 1, Angie Knackstedt who’s been director nursing education is going to join us half-time and continue her work in nursing education and health literacy. So that’s our full-time staff.

Then we have 20-25 doctors who are associated with the center and with whom we’ve collaborated on various projects, including some folks in your section.

JN: Correct. We’ve had some of our own; I think you mentioned the vaccine mandate being one of those issues that has really been a hot topic for my group of folks as well.

JL: Right, so we’ve looked both at mandates for kids – mandatory vaccines and whether parents should be allowed to invoke religious or philosophical objections to childhood vaccines, but also the issue of mandatory flu vaccines for hospital employees.

JN: Right up our alley and I’m sure we could get into a discussion about that. You could have your own podcast of just these types of issues.

JL: We could do one on each of these issues.

JN: So you mentioned the certificate program. What is that?

JL: One of the most exciting things we’ve done is to start the first certificate program in pediatric bioethics in the country...probably in the world. It’s a program designed for experienced child health professionals; doctors, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, chaplains, people who have worked in a children’s hospital. Many of them are members of their children’s hospital ethics committee – although they don’t have to be – but people who want to learn more about what’s been written about the issues that arise in pediatrics. The program is mostly online. It’s a year-long program. People come here for an opening weekend called bioethics boot camp – all day, every day – total emersion in some recent controversies in research ethics, clinical ethics and health policy. Then they go back to their day jobs, back to their home institutions and every week we give them reading assignments online, have an online discussion board, they get writing assignments, each of them does a research project, and they come back together at the end to present their work to their colleagues and the faculty.
JN: Is it a year-long program, or how long is it?

JL: Nine months; starts in September, ends in May. For people outside Children’s Mercy, tuition is about $7,500. For Children’s Mercy full-time employees we waive the tuition.

JN: So there’s no cost for full-time Children’s Mercy employees?

JL: No cost.

JN: That’s really neat! So when does it start? When would they need to get their applications in if they’re interested?

JL: We’re taking applications now for the 2014-15 year. They should send them to me – jlantos@cmh.edu or Mary Ellen Hudson – mhudson@cmh.edu.

JN: So they just email you if they’re interested?

JL: There’s an application on our website. They can find that on The Scope. The application requires a brief, personal statement, a CV and a couple letters of recommendation. We can give the names of Children’s Mercy folks who have been through the program so they can get answers to questions. It’s growing rapidly. The first year we had 15 people, the second year 20 and this year we have 30.

JN: Really? That’s awesome!

JL: They come from all over the country, and even internationally.

JL: When does it actually start?

JL: Middle of September. So people who apply now, if they get in they would start in September.

JN: Of 2014.

JL: That’s correct. I’ve seen a pediatrician from Norway, a PICU doctor from Saudi Arabia, a bunch of people from Canada.

JN: That’s exciting! A world renowned program like that and you’re getting all these people involved. I hope for our listeners, it will give you another reason to be proud of this place. To have such a center that’s pushing this type of work forward is awesome. So congratulations.

JL: People should come join us. Anybody interested in bioethics, send me a note and enroll in our certificate program and you’ll learn a lot more.

JN: That sounds great! You might actually find me in one of those year-long courses….if I got accepted right? (laughter). As you can tell John already knows me quite well.

JL: Do you think you could get two letters of reference?

JN: Maybe my wife?? Anyway, John, thank you so much for coming on and joining me today.

JL: My pleasure.

JL: Again to the listeners, thanks for listening. If you have any questions, future podcast ideas, please don’t hesitate to contact me at jnewland1@cmh.edu. Have a good week!