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THE PROMISE OF IMMORTALITY

“Humans may live to 500 years” proclaimed the headline, while the authoritative expert pronounced, “people can live from 120-150 years. Advances in manipulating cells and genes, as well as nanotechnology, will push the body’s accepted boundaries”. Indeed, “we are knocking at the door of immortality.”

And herein lies the spell of science over society — its promise of increasing longevity, with immortality the holy grail.

Some 30 years ago, US President Richard M Nixon declared war on cancer. He confidently predicted that science would defeat this scourge in time for the US Bicentennial! This celebration has come and gone, and although battles against cancer have been won, the war is far from over.

In the new millennium, science has a tantalising new promise — that the human genome project will provide the tools to conquer death. William Haseltine, the project’s superstar, has thrown down the gauntlet, declaring that “death is a series of preventable diseases.” Armed with magic bullets from the genomic armoury, the soldiers of science will stalk and pick off one disease after another in the battle for immortality. However, there is danger in the hype.

The very denial of death and dying will undoubtedly influence medical thinking, feeling and doing. Daniel Callahan, the US ethicist, argues that the modern research imperative [*to vanquish death*] and the clinical imperative [*to accept death as an inevitable reality*] are in conflict. Such inherent conflict may well cause physicians to view death as accidental, or even as failure. More worrying would be the undermining of society’s imperative to ensure humane care of the dying.

Science may well promise and prosper. But should it promote the promise of immortality?

Martin B Van Der Weyden

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