BABY THERESA
"An Infant with No Prospects: Baby Theresa"

Theresa Ann Campo Pearson, an anencephalic infant known to the public as "Baby Theresa," was born in Florida in 1992. Anencephaly is among the worst congenital disorders. Anencephalic infants are sometimes referred to as "babies without brains," and this gives roughly the right picture, but it is not quite accurate.

Important parts of the brain - the cerebrum and the cerebellum - are missing, as well as the top of the skull. There is, however, a brain-stem, and so autonomic functions such as breathing and heartbeat are possible. In the United States, most cases of anencephaly are detected during pregnancy and aborted. Of those not aborted, half are stillborn. About 300 each year are born alive, and they usually die within a few days.

Baby Theresa's story would not be remarkable but for an unusual request made by her parents. Knowing that their baby could not live long, and that, even if she could, she would never have a conscious life, Baby Theresa's parents volunteered her organs for transplant. They thought her kidneys, liver, heart, lungs, and eyes should go to other children who could benefit from them.

The physicians agreed that this was a good idea. At least 2000 infants need transplants each year, and there are never enough organs available.

But the organs were not taken, because Florida law does not allow the removal of organs until the donor is dead, and by the time Baby Theresa had died, nine days later, it was too late for the other children --- her organs could not be transplanted because they had deteriorated too much.

The newspaper stories about Baby Theresa prompted a great deal of public discussion. Would it have been right to remove the infant's organs, thereby causing her immediate death, to help other children?

A number of professional "ethicists" - people employed by universities, hospitals, and law schools, whose job it is to think about such matters - were called on by the press to comment. Surprisingly few of them agreed with the parents or the physicians. Instead they appealed to time-honored philosophical principles to oppose taking the organs. Said one such expert:

It just seems too horrifying to use people as means to other people's ends.

Another explained:

- It is unethical to kill in order to save lives.
- It is unethical to kill one person A to save person B.

And a third added:

What the parents are really asking for is: Kill this dying baby so that its organs may be used for someone else. Well, that's a really horrendous proposition.

Was it really horrendous? These commentators thought so, while the parents and the doctors did not. But we are interested in more than what people happen to think Were the parents right or wrong to volunteer the baby's organs for transplant? We have to ask what reasons, or arguments, can be given for each side. What can be said to justify the parents' request or to justify thinking they were wrong?