Michels gives first Waggoner Lecture on 'coming ethical crisis'

By Michelle Donelson
Medical Center Public Relations

The shift toward managed care demands that a new code of ethics be established to protect the sacred relationship between doctor and patient, and to uphold the ideals and responsibilities of medical practice. That was the message delivered by Robert Michels, dean of Cornell University Medical College, and the first-ever lecturer in the Raymond W. Waggoner Lectureship on Ethics and Values in Medicine created by the School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry.

Michels described a "coming ethical crisis" in the practice of medicine at University Hospital's Ford Auditorium last week. "Doctors used to have all the power. For some years, we've been forced to share this power with patients. Patient autonomy is thought to be a good thing, but now both are losing ground to decisions made by large corporations and anonymous people," Michels said. "This is a serious change where power has been placed in the system."

Michels pointed out that managed health care should act as a watchdog over physicians. "Everyone agrees that one of the benefits of the new system is to monitor, enhance and ensure the quality of care. We need a new kind of ethics—an ethics of organizations. If organizations are going to have the power to make medical decisions, we need a new code of ethics for these organizations."

Raymond W. Waggoner, retired chairman of the Department of Psychiatry, was in attendance for the lecture-ship named in his honor. The 94-year-old professor emeritus maintains his ties to the U-M and the department he molded for 33 years.

Waggoner was an early advocate of integrating medical and psychiatric care, recognizing that mental illness can result from physical problems as well as emotional disturbances. During his 66-year association with the U-M, Waggoner has influenced mental health policy in Michigan and across the nation. He advised presidents Harry Truman and Franklin Roosevelt on how to treat returning war veterans and how to select men for military service.