

## **What We Learned from the Ford Pinto Case Study**

### **Summary:**

As engineers, our work has significant impact on society and we have a responsibility to protect the public. The technical complexity of issues within our profession, coupled with rapid changes in technology, mean that the public cannot be protected through explicit laws alone, since the laws cannot always be current enough or provide sufficient detail to handle all relevant situations and still encourage responsible innovation. Development of and adherence to a professional code of ethics is therefore necessary. Enforcement of the code is accomplished through appeal to enlightened self-interest (it truly is in every engineer's self-interest to follow a code of ethics), peer pressure, and a civil court system which uses professional peers to advise juries concerning reasonable engineering practices.

### **Specific Points:**

- 1) An engineer has a responsibility to employ reasonable engineering practices concerning the safety of the products he or she develops.
- 2) As a society, we elect to take certain risks because of the possible benefits we may gain. For example, we choose to have a 70 mph speed limit on highways rather than drive at 20 mph, which would reduce the number of accidents, because the higher speed limit allows us to reach our destinations much faster. The key to society taking these risks is that the members of society give an informed consent.
- 3) Because of their technical background, engineers are more likely to grasp the possible societal and safety implications of a technology or a product than either company management or the general public. An engineer has the responsibility to inform management of possible safety hazards in products he or she is developing. If management does not respond appropriately, the engineer has a responsibility to work within his/her company to make sure that his/her concerns are known and given due consideration. The engineer may also have a responsibility to inform the public (i.e., to blow the whistle).
- 4) Engineers have ethical responsibilities concerning the public's safety which are more stringent than legal obligations.