I am grateful to Terrence P. McEachern for his thoughtful reflections in this issue on a piece published earlier in the pages of *Theoretical Medicine* entitled “The research subject as wage earner.”¹ In his commentary, he points to areas of substantial agreement between us, but also worries that our argument in favor of a right to meaningful work for professional research subjects will undermine their welfare by acting as an undue inducement to research participation.² In this all too brief response, I will attempt to clarify our position, in hopes that points of agreement may be strengthened, and grounds for disagreement mitigated.

The original piece is a response to an influential article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by Neil Dickert and Christine Grady called “What’s the price of a research subject? Approaches to payment for research participation.”³ Dickert and Grady consider three models for paying research subjects: the market model; the reimbursement model; and the wage-payment model. They reject the market model, which would allow market forces to determine equitable payment, on grounds that “payment may be so high that all other factors become irrelevant.”⁴ The reimbursement model, in which subjects are only paid for expenses incurred, is rejected because “it may yield an insufficient number of subjects within the desired time frame.”⁵ They endorse the wage-payment model, in which all subjects receive a wage fixed to the average salary of an unskilled worker, in part because it alleviates concerns about payment as an undue inducement to potentially risky participation in research. They explain, “Because most potential subjects are likely to have other options for earning similar amounts of money, they will presumably choose participation in research when they prefer it to other options for earning an unskilled-labor wage.”⁶ What, then, is the price of a research subject? According to Dickert and Grady, about $10 per hour.

In the “Research subject as wage earner” we explore the moral implications of the premise at the heart of Dickert and Grady’s
proposal – namely, that being a research participant is no different in any morally substantive sense from being any other kind of unskilled laborer. It is the very interchangeability of employment as research subject or short-order cook or unskilled construction worker or telemarketer that allows Dickert and Grady to claim that payment as wage earner is not an undue inducement. But in focusing on dollar payments to subjects, Dickert and Grady take too narrow a view of working conditions for research subjects. Our article, then, is an attempt to flesh out the broader working conditions that ought to be considered if one accepts the wage-earner model. This effort does not necessarily imply our endorsement of the wage-earner model.

For the purposes of our analysis, research subjects may be divided into two groups. Occasional research subjects – that is, those for whom research is a one-time or at best occasional experience – likely constitute the majority of research subjects. We argue from legal and moral principles that they are, like other occasional workers, entitled to a basic minimum of workplace protections. Occasional research subjects are entitled at least to a minimal wage. They ought to have a standard work day and week (eight hours a day, and 40 hours per week), and ought to receive overtime pay when their hours exceed this standard. They have the right to a safe workplace, and to no-fault insurance should they become injured in the workplace. Finally, they have a right to organize into unions for collective bargaining purposes. McEachern’s recounting the tragic death of a college student calls for just such a broader view of working conditions of research subjects.7 When the focus is solely on the level of remuneration, issues of safety and no-fault compensation for harm are all too easily overlooked. Thus we applaud McEachern’s recognition of the importance of extending the wage-earner model “to include just working conditions.” For, as he notes, “such an act may have had a preventative effect with our tragic example...”.

The second group of research subjects are professional research subjects, people who participate in research frequently and who exhibit dependency, commitment, and investment in research participation as a career. Undoubtedly, a slim minority of research subjects are professional in this sense. On our view, professional research subjects ought to have recognized all the workplace entitlements that occasional research subjects enjoy, but like others who hold careers in unskilled labor, they ought to have additional rights recognized. Professional subjects have recognized rights to a pension, medical and dental benefits, and meaningful work. Mean-