

Bioethics in modern medicine

The well known British philosopher O'Neil defines bioethics as a meeting ground for a number of different disciplines and institutions concerned with ethical, legal and social questions raised by advances in medicine, science, and biotechnology. Why is bioethics relevant to modern medicine? First of all, because modern medicine brings so many new ethical dilemmas which have not been even addressed by so-called traditional medical ethics. Especially controversial bioethical problems are related to the issues of research on human subjects, use of reproductive technologies, handling of genetic information, legalizing the rules of organ procurement and transplantation to mention but few examples. Human cloning and embryo stem cell research have been the most recent examples of a world-wide bioethical debate, which also reached our country. A very clear example of these problems might be the recent South Korean scandal on fabricating the data of embryonic stem cell research as well as exploiting the members of research team coerced to donate their eggs for this infamous experiment.

This brings us to another major bioethical topic, namely research ethics, which might attract special attention of the reader as the journal mostly publishes data based on human research. It is important to note that nowadays every single research project involving human beings should only be started after having an approval from an independent research ethics committee. It should also be conducted in accordance with the basic ethical principles such as informed consent, protection of privacy and justice. On a larger scale, the mentioned principles of research ethics have already been firmly established by such international instruments as the Declaration of Helsinki, CIOMS guidelines or the Council of Europe Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. It should also be pointed out that an ethical review of large-scale multi-centre biomedical projects to be financed by the European Commission has been started. A scientific review of these projects is always followed by the ethical one as soon as sensitive

moral issues related to human and animal research are identified.

The papers published in this issue of the journal were presented during two different international bioethics conferences recently organized in Vilnius. The first conference took place in May of 2004 and was targeting a very important and at the same time somewhat neglected issue of training the members of research ethics committees. The second conference, held in September 2005, was devoted to the 10th anniversary of Lithuanian Bioethics Committee. The papers presented in the journal provide the reader with an interesting and diverse picture of bioethical debate. Peteris Zilgalvis elucidates the main principles of the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, especially as they relate to the field of biomedical research. The Convention might be considered to be one of the most influential instruments setting common European standards in the field of bioethics. The topic of training in research ethics is developed by two other authors. Knut W. Ruyter presents a picture of developing the research ethics training system in Norway, and Dirk Lanzerath provides a very comprehensive overview of such training modules in Europe and the USA while stressing the necessity to develop a European approach. The reader will also be invited to follow the plans of building a digital health records database in Estonia and consider the potential ethical controversies of such a plan presented by Arvo Tikk. Finally, Robert Gmeiner gives a very detailed and rich analysis of bioethical discourse on a variety of issues in Austria, which to some extent might remind us of some similar features in the Lithuanian bioethical debate.

This special issue of the journal including papers by well-known European bioethics experts might be regarded as an important event in the development of bioethics in Lithuania.

*E. Gefenas, M.D., Ph.D.
Department of Medical History and Ethics
Medical Faculty of Vilnius University*