A CIOMS initiative has triggered an international dialogue on WHO's drive for Health for all by the year 2000, and on the interaction between health policy and ethical and human values by Zbigniew Bankowski and Frank Gutteridge

Not so long ago—indeed within living memory—there was little that medicine could do for the seriously ill, except to offer consolation and some relief from pain. As Dr Norman Howard-Jones, former Director of WHO's Division of Editorial and Reference Service, pointed out in an essay on the historical and ethical perspectives of medical experimentation, the practice of medicine up to the end of the 18th century had hardly advanced since the time of Hippocrates. In other words, it had remained static over a period spanning almost two and a half millennia.

In the 19th century, the means of improving public health were developed, both empirically and scientifically. But the great advances, as well as a more profound understanding of the origins and treatment of disease, came only in the present century. Indeed only in recent years has attention begun to be focused on the issues that attend these advances and, ironically, it is these very advances that have created new moral and ethical dilemmas in medicine and public health.

There are many examples of these. Is it right that a disproportionate share of resources should be concentrated on the care of the elderly suffering from terminal disease? Should provision be made for costly high technology facilities at public expense, such as heart transplants, when a better cost/benefit ratio could be obtained by diverting the expenditure to improving personal lifestyles?

Issues such as these were debated some months ago at a Round Table Conference held in Athens, Greece, convened by the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS). CIOMS, a non-governmental organization in relation with WHO and UNESCO, arranges these conferences in order to create international and interdisciplinary forums where the scientific and lay communities can express their views on topics of immediate concern, unhampered by administrative, political or other considerations. The meetings are designed not only to express the scientific and technical basis of new developments in biology and medicine, but also to explore their social, ethical, moral, administrative, economic and legal implications.

The main objectives of the Athens conference were:

- to identify and compare the ethical content of selected health policy issues from the perspectives of different national, cultural and religious settings;
- to examine the interaction of ethical factors and other determinants of health policy in the policy-making process in those different settings;
- to explore activities and arrangements that could assist interested countries in enhancing their capacities for dealing with the interaction of ethics and health policy-making;
- to consider the usefulness of this kind of dialogue in promoting better international understanding across cultural, economic and political lines.

The participants—whether health policy-makers, physicians, scientists, nurses, philosophers or ethicists—were under no illusions as to the difficulties facing them. Before them were fundamental problems that have long baffled philosophers: How do you define human values and ethics? Is a policy to be applauded because the consequences appear to be "virtuous" or the actions to be taken are seemingly "right"? How can one distinguish ethics in public policy from other considerations—political, economic, cultural, religious and organizational? Health policy-makers may well not be physicians, so they will not necessarily view from the same standpoint as the...
physician certain decisions that may have to be taken and that will have consequences at the level of the doctor-patient relationship.

These, and other related issues were discussed by the keynote speaker, Dr Edmund Pellegrino of the Joseph and Rose Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Washington D.C. He defined the major terms in the title of the conference, "Health Policy, Ethics and Human Values", pointed out the general aims that motivate health policies, and identified the levels of moral responsibility that physicians should exercise in making judgements and choices essential to policy formation and operation.

The conference proposed three approaches: an examination of the practical problems of making policy decisions, an examination of a series of case studies, and an examination of the fundamental values underlying the interaction of health policy, ethics and human values by considering the meanings which life, suffering and death hold for a number of the world's principal religions and ideologies.

WHO's principal theme for this and the next decade, the goal of Health for all by the year 2000, was identified as a central issue in considering health policy, ethics and human values. Some participants apparently misunderstood the import of this goal by equating "Health for all" with "Health services for all," an identification also erroneously made by certain observers in the human rights field in relation to the WHO definition of health. The conference thus provided a valuable forum for explaining and discussing the objectives of Health for all and the need to fully understand its important and profound meanings. These include responsibility for individual health through the adoption of healthy lifestyles, the lessening of dependency on health personnel and the promotion of self-reliance through community participation, and a fuller understanding of factors outside medical care or prevention that contribute to human dignity and the quality of life.

The participants then reviewed five case studies, chosen as being of interest to both developed and developing countries, which addressed questions of policy and ethics of immediate concern in many countries and on the horizon of concern in others. These were: the allocation of resources for primary health care; public policy and hereditary disease; care of low-birth-weight infants; health care of the elderly; and organ substitution therapy.

The discussion highlighted some of the paradoxes in present-day approaches to the problems. On the one hand, as one speaker pointed out, the advances of medical sciences have resulted in no fewer and possibly even more problems arising than have actually been solved; as a Chinese saying has it: "The Demon goes up ten feet as Tao (the Right Way) rises one foot." On the other hand, biomedical sciences and public health measures have removed some vexing dilemmas of a moral and ethical nature, such as compulsory vaccination for smallpox.

In the course of the conference, individual participants found it difficult to suspend their own values in order to understand the values of others. The sharpest conflict arose in a discussion of the origins of human values, opposing divine enlightenment against secular humanism. Nevertheless, there evolved during the discussions a greater understanding and insight into the wide variety of values and social systems represented. This understanding led the conference to discuss the broader issues facing humanity, and to endorse the state-
ment that the participants found it ethically unacceptable "that country of birth should be a determining factor in access to health care and in achieving or not achieving the limits of individual capacity."

It was agreed that there should be continued collaborative follow-up of the issues discussed and that, at the least, a mechanism should be established that would support regional groupings in a continued inquiry into issues of regional interest. CIOMS will serve as the organizing focal point and has initiated "an international dialogue on interactions of health policy, ethics and human values." This dialogue will develop a network of interested individuals, institutions and countries from a variety of cultural, religious and ideological backgrounds to share ideas and concern about the issues involved.

Specifically its objectives are to strengthen national capacities for addressing and making decisions on the ethical and human value issues involved in health policy; to contribute to improved understanding of the concepts inherent in WHO's goal of Health for all, particularly in terms of its value content; to develop transcultural and transdisciplinary approaches and methods for working in this field; and to use improved understanding of the approaches of various societies to the ethical and human values aspects of health policy as a means to pursue deeper human understanding of those values across cultural and political lines.

The thematic framework will be WHO's goal of Health for all which raises many questions bearing on equity and social justice. Whereas WHO and other interested parties are experienced in dealing with technical, political, economic and managerial problems associated with Health for all, the issues related to human values are addressed less often and less well. Indeed, value conflicts are often expressed as technical, political, economic and managerial obstacles, and are not recognised as value conflicts. Commitment to the Health for all goal has also to be understood in terms of understanding the values involved, since its basic precepts—particularly that there be universal coverage with effective health services, with communities playing prominent roles in determining the nature of those services—are relevant to all nations and cultures.

An international dialogue on health policy, ethics and human values will be assured a dynamic and stimulating milieu, and will surely generate its own momentum, particularly in view of the profound underlying importance of international dialogue in these times of global tension and instability.

In fact such a dialogue has already begun. The CIOMS first sponsored an international regional conference in March 1986 in New Delhi on the Indian perspective in relation to health policy, ethics and human values, and the second was convened for this month in Noordwijk aan Zee, Netherlands, on "Interactions of health policy, ethics and human values: a European and North American perspective." A similar conference is being planned for countries with predominant Islamic culture, and others will be arranged in the contexts of Africa, South America and South Asia. Within the framework of this dialogue, a conference will take place in Bangkok next year on "Ethics and human values in family planning".

As the Athens keynote speaker Dr Pellegrino said: "Once framed, a health policy unerringly reveals the values that drive a society; and these cannot escape examination retrospectively." It is to be hoped that this unusual initiative will open new avenues of international cooperation for the benefit of all nations and societies.

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