

Invited Commentary

PAHO's Regional Program on Bioethics in health care and research

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Behaviour in health-care settings is guided by beliefs about what is good and legal norms determining what is permitted and what is forbidden. Neither beliefs nor laws can anticipate all situations or respond adequately to every circumstance. This is one reason why dialogue is a tool for legitimating courses of actions, validating decision-making processes and giving foundation to principles. Bioethics as social discourse is based upon the recognition that dialogue legitimates decisions and tackles the moral and epistemic pluralism prevalent in human societies.

The issue of diversity is a key one. Since their establishment, modern professions have been characterized by an asymmetry between experts and lay people. This is what some call the 'vertical' organization of useful knowledge and constitutes one of the fundamentals of professional power. On the one side there are experts, and on the other side there are ignorant persons. Experts know best.

The diffusion of information has challenged this view. Ignorant patients have become informed clients who demand services and request them knowing their value. This 'horizontalization' of decision making challenges the traditional paternalism of the health professionals, in which the benefit of patients was sought without their opinion. Paternalism is beneficence without autonomy and it has permeated the ethos of the health professions since ancient times.

Although bioethics is a word with different meanings, the one most appropriate in the context of international cooperation in health is that of a social discourse which by means of dialogue and consensus-building seeks the ethical sustainability of decisions in the health-care field. It is in the process of dialogical construction of convictions based upon general ethical principles that foundation for practices is grounded.

The ways of implementing dialogue may vary. The accepted practice is through social institutions called committees or commissions, where people from different backgrounds, beliefs and experiences come together and establish a give-and-take process of

consultation. The true foundation is procedural, not a series of abstract principles or directives. Legitimate decisions are decisions arrived at in the context of such consultative bodies.

These groups can be organized with different aims in mind. The most common varieties are the 'research' and 'clinical' committees. The former are also called in some countries 'institutional review boards'. The main tasks are either to review and approve research protocols or to supervise the delivery of health care. Clinical ethics committees are neither places of advocacy nor courts where negligent professionals are brought to trial. They are loci of encounters between different social actors and agents involved in the constructions of health and well-being.

A pioneer among international organizations, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), established the Regional Program on Bioethics early in the 1990s. Its tasks involve training personnel acquainted with basic ethical principles, analysis of the curricula of professional schools, development of the practice and theory of ethical review boards and clinical ethics committees, collaboration with public and private entities in the implementation of fair policies and public information about rights and practices relevant to health care. Since its establishment it has helped create a group of people in the Latin American and Caribbean region with strong commitment to the furtherance of the bioethical enterprise, in the conviction that the great challenges in the years to come are not how to have more science and more medicine but how to have better science and medicine for the people, through the people and with the people.

The operation of the programme is made possible by the joint collaboration between PAHO, the University of Chile and the Chilean government. Its main lines of action can be consulted in the PAHO server (<http://www.paho.org>) or in a special website at the University of Chile (<http://www.uchile.cl/bioetica>). Publications and information can be requested there.

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