



CONSELHO NACIONAL DE ÉTICA PARA AS CIÊNCIAS DA VIDA

DOCUMENTO

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5th EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL ETHICS COMMITTEES

**A STATEMENT FROM THE PORTUGUESE
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ETHICS FOR THE LIFE SCIENCES**

1. What is the experience of National Ethics Committees regarding society's fears about scientific and medical developments?

Scientific and medical developments did not bring about, so far, considerable fears in the Portuguese society. It is true that the eventual possibility of human cloning became a popular issue and arose public curiosity and interest, but not generalised fear. Well-informed people show concern on transgenic food, stem cells research, genetic testing in the workplace and other new scientific developments, but the discussions didn't become emotional. Emotional was, in contrast, the public discussions around new legislative initiatives on the old problem of abortion and, to a smaller extent, around the attempts to legally regulate medically assisted reproduction.

2. According to the Committees, are there fears due to a failure of communication or to a poor communication between science and society?

The causes of this low level of fear are not completely clear. One cause may be the fact that science and technology don't play yet a central role in Portuguese concerns. Some media try to inform and discuss new scientific developments announced abroad. However, in many cases, this communication is more sensational than formative, due to the low number of elements of the media having sufficient scientific education and also due to the difficulties which scientists experience in expressing their views to the public. In addition, since many of the most advanced biotechnologies are not yet much practised in Portugal, they remain somehow exterior to the immediate public concerns.

3. What is the role of National Ethics Committees in the public debate? And in the way science communicates with society?

The Portuguese *National Council of Ethics for the Life Sciences* promotes several initiatives in order to foster public debate on science and ethics. Every year,

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the Council organises a public Seminar for the debate of emerging bioethical problems. The Proceedings of these Seminars are published and distributed. Also published and distributed are the Opinions and other documents produced by the Council. For its Plenary Sessions, experts are sometimes called to give their opinions and enlarge the debate. Many members of the Council take part in public bioethical debates throughout the country and abroad. A meeting of several members of the Council with a group of students of a course for journalists also took place. Most members of the Council teach in several Master courses or post-graduate courses on bioethics and are active in the meetings and publications of the "Centro de Estudos de Bioética" and other similar groups. The Portuguese Medical Association, together with "Casa da Imprensa" and a pharmaceutical industry, organised, in 1998 and 1999, the First Course on Health Issues for Journalists. In general, we experience that bioethics is a motivating vector to communicate science and technology to society.

4. What are the problems met by the National Ethics Committees during their initiatives to organise public debate?

The Portuguese *National Council of Ethics for the Life Sciences* was created in 1990. In the first years of its activity, several difficulties were encountered, like deficient infrastructures, poor visibility in the media, insufficient interest for the publications of the Council, weak impact of the Council's opinions on the discussions taking place in the Parliament or Government and, above all, poor public perception of the significance of scientific developments and of their ethical implications. These difficulties were partially overcome in recent years.

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