
Director's Letter



BIOETHICS

Leafing through a major newspaper in any country of the Region will undoubtedly turn up an article that reports on bioethical concerns. The discipline of bioethics has advanced rapidly during the last 30 years in developed countries, and intense interest in it has awakened in the rest of the world. As the influence of technology and politics on medicine increases, public discussion of health and medical issues is also expanding. This expansion is due at least in part to the information and communications revolution that allows news of scientific advances to be disseminated from one country to another almost instantaneously. Many breakthroughs—in such fields as genetic engineering, organ transplantation, and human fertility—pose new moral dilemmas. In democratic and pluralistic societies, where the demand for equity and efficiency in health services is growing, open debates are taking place over who should be responsible for decisions that have a profound impact on the quality of life and on dignity at the time of death. Bioethical reflections provide a philosophic and moral framework in which to resolve these questions in an orderly and just manner, with respect and tolerance for diverse professional and personal ethics and beliefs in different societies.

In its effort to supply its Member Countries with the best possible technical cooperation, the Pan American Health Organization tries not only to respond to requests and concerns but to anticipate them. As part of this effort, the special issues of the *Bulletin* have proved to be a popular and effective medium for in-depth examination of critical current topics from an international perspective. This collection of articles, the first produced in the international health system on the theory and practice of bioethics, is also the first analysis of this field in the Americas as a whole. It is our hope that the works presented here will bring to mind the precious principles on which Western medical tradition and our ethics as health professionals are founded—the duty to treat, respect for the patient, confidentiality, concern, and humanity: "I urge you not to be too unkind. . . . And if you have occasion, especially provide care for someone who is a foreigner or who is poor, for where there is love of man there also is love of art" (*Precepts 6, Hippocratic Corpus*). On recalling these ideals, our compassion and dedication cannot help but be restored.

Medicine and health are today and always will be social practices with deep and undeniable links to humanistic and moral considerations. As our capacity to intervene in the course of an individual's life or a society's development is amplified through science and technology, the need also grows to scrutinize their use in the light of ethical reasoning. This current challenge will become even more important in the future.



Carlyle Guerra de Macedo
Pan American Sanitary Bureau