Bioethics: Introduction to the Special Issue

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The introduction to the Encyclopedia of Bioethics defines bioethics as "... the systematic study of human conduct in the area of life sciences and health care, insofar as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles...."

"Bioethics encompasses medical ethics and extends beyond it. Medical ethics in the traditional sense deals with value-related problems that arise in the physician-patient relationship. Bioethics is more inclusive in four important ways:

- It embraces the value-related problems that arise in all health professions, including the 'allied' professions, mental health professions, and so forth.
- It extends to biomedical research and behavioral research, whether or not that research has a direct bearing on therapy.
- It includes a broad range of social issues, such as those associated with public health, occupational health, international health, and the ethics of population control.
- It extends beyond human life and health to embrace issues involving animal and plant life, e.g., in matters relating to animal experimentation and to competing environmental claims."

Within the realm of the biologic sciences, the inquiry of bioethics is very similar to the moral inquiry arising after World War II and the creation of nuclear weapons that could obliterate mankind, regarding the limits that society should impose upon science and technology. Interest in this field has increased following successes in deciphering the human genetic code and the emergence of new possibilities for scientific manipulation of nature. Such diverse matters as the role of biomedical sciences in war, release into the environment of compounds derived with recombinant DNA technology, compulsory population control policies, the dehumanization and institutionalization of medical care, and research on children, sexual ethics, and suicide all fall within the scope of bioethics.

This presentation is far more limited in scope, dealing in an introductory fashion with only the traditional ethics of medicine and allied health professions and the ethics of research involving human subjects (both "microethics" issues), and the philosophic bases for allocation of resources in a health care system (a "macroethics" issue). From the viewpoint of the editors, this work is a logical extension of our previous collaboration on hu-

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man rights in health. The microethical questions raised here involve the individual human rights of privacy, dignity, and integrity, while the macroethical question addresses the nature and extent of society’s human right to health.

In North America, bioethical reflection has achieved a full flowering and maturity, and is being taught at schools of medicine, philosophy, theology, and law. More than 220 journals in the English-speaking world alone are devoted in whole or in part to bioethics. In Latin America, the field can be considered as just emerging; materials in Spanish are scattered and less abundant, although here also important work is being done.

Within this context, the purpose of this special issue of the Bulletin is twofold. One aim, that of providing an introductory overview of the above mentioned "microethics" and "macroethics" issues, is served by three initial groups of articles (which deal with bioethics theory, practice, and application from a microethics standpoint) and three Round Table presentations (which treat the macroethics issue). The second aim, that of showing where particular countries stand in terms of policy and development of programs related to bioethics issues, is achieved through the articles in the "Regional Panorama" section.

A word of caution: While all the contributors are esteemed intellectuals and most are recognized international bioethics leaders, many of the articles were written over a year before publication of this issue. In particular, some of the presentations on individual countries may be slightly out of date—an all but inevitable occurrence where the exigencies of translation and multilingual editing invariably cause delay.

The initial articles are grouped under the three subheadings of "Theorema," "Applicatum," and "Practicum." In the Theorem section, the contributing authors give theoretical and historical background to modern perspectives in bioethics and discuss relationships with other spheres of inquiry including philosophy, religion, law, and technology. The meaning and interrelationships of the bioethics "trinity" of autonomy, beneficence (including nonmaleficence), and justice are brought out in these articles.

Diego Gracia’s introduction, from his recently completed Fundamentos de la bioética, defines the field, reviews the historical bases for the modern approach to it, and shows why quite aside from high technology—developments relating to pluralism, democracy, and human rights have created a need for review of bioethics.

Edmund Pellegrino, considered by many as the godfather of bioethics, explores the search for virtue and beneficence in the doctor-patient relationship, suggesting that the legalistic term "autonomy" be replaced with the more humanistic term "integrity" and stressing that both integrity of persons and autonomy depend on the physician’s being a person of integrity.

Hans-Martin Sass, a noted philosopher, analyzes the relationship of bioethics and philosophy, examining their historical connections, the philosophic nature of medicine, and the principles of modern bioethics. Among his conclusions: "Ethics without expertise can never be efficacious, while expertise without ethics is unlikely to serve the patient’s good."

Francisco Vilardell underscores the ethical conflicts inherent in technologic advances—conflicts involving technologic abuses, unrealized public expectations, and social cost. He suggests that cost-benefit reviews be conducted before introducing new technologies, especially in developing countries.

The undeniable impact of religious perspectives on bioethics and the impor-
tance of religious narratives for recognition of moral issues is discussed by theologian Courtney Campbell, who also briefly considers how three religious perspectives (Orthodox Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant) can influence approaches to the bioethical issue of death and dying.

The Practicum section explores several techniques developed to apply bioethics principles to concrete moral problems. James Drane leads off this section with an analysis and review of the leading methodologies of clinical ethics. He expresses the view that a European and Latin American approach may be less technical and more philosophically sophisticated than the approach generally used in the United States and Canada.

A number of realistic cases involving ethical problems in nursing are described and analyzed by M. Angelica Piwonka. The author concentrates on the point that health care must be based on humanistic recognition of the overall dignity of the individual, especially in view of the dehumanizing factors present in modern society.

The history and varied functions (clinical, scientific, and deontologic) of hospital ethics review committees are summarized by Juan Carlos Tealdi and José Alberto Mainetti, who also give insight into their own experiences in Argentina and make valuable recommendations about formation of such committees in Latin America.

María del Carmen Lara and Juan Ramón de la Fuente explore the basic concept of informed consent. They explain its derivation from the concepts of autonomy and dignity, point out theoretical and practical difficulties with it, note the principal differences between consent to treatment and consent to experimentation, and provide suggestions based on their own extensive experience in Mexico.

The Applicatum section, unfortunately not as broad as initially planned, deals with the application of bioethics in four sensitive areas—organ transplantation, the act of dying, the reporting of AIDS cases, and research on human subjects.

One of the editors, Hernán Fuenzalida-Puelma, reviews the issues involved in organ transplantation from a legal perspective. The matters discussed include donor consent, determination of death, conflicts of interest, recipient selection, donor compensation, and commerce in tissues and organs for transplant. Extensive annex tables provide an important source of information about laws on organ transplants in Latin America.

The "new form of dying" and its various ethical problems are given thoughtful humanistic treatment by Alfonso Llano Escobar, S.J., who reminds us that God must continue being God, and man, however technical and wise, must be conscious of his limitations and of his role as an instrument in the hands of God for the good of humanity.

Key legal and ethical aspects of AIDS, matters of great concern to PAHO and WHO, are described by Ronald Bayer and Larry Gostin. The authors masterfully underscore the need to respect the fundamental values of liberal society in designing a public health policy on AIDS that "at once protects the public health and the rights of the vulnerable."

Diana Serrano LaVertu and Ana María Linares, both in the PAHO Legal Office, explore circumstances and problems that researchers from the developed world may encounter when undertaking research involving human subjects in the developing world.

A fourth subheading, "Regional Panorama," brings together a collection of articles dealing with current controversies in diverse countries. For the purpose of obtaining this collection, we asked eminent national scholars to give a brief
overview of the situation in their countries and suggested the following possible topics: (1) regulation of biotechnology; (2) education in bioethics; (3) ethics review committees; (4) research involving human subjects; (5) regulation of reproduction (family planning, abortion, defective newborns, surrogate mothers, artificial insemination, genetics research); (6) death and dying (definition of death, “do not resuscitate” orders, withdrawal of life-support systems, withdrawal of artificial feeding, and participation by the patient, family, physician, hospital, and judicial system); (7) organ transplants (regulation, prevention of disease transmission, national registry, allocation of resources, commerce); and (8) AIDS (testing, confidentiality, third party notification, reporting).

We were astounded at the depth and sophistication of the analyses received. Many authors, besides addressing these specific topics, also gave a full description of bioethics principles and related activities in their own countries. The result is a rich mosaic of national perspectives from nine countries, as follows:

Argentina: Justo Zanier and colleagues review the postgraduate course in bioethics at Mar del Plata University, the international bioethics symposium held in that city in 1988, and formation of the Inter-American Group for Bioethics.

Brazil: Hélio Pereira Dias, Legal Counsel to the Ministry of Health and foremost Brazilian health lawyer, discusses the legal and ethical provisions relating to control of the health professions, family planning, research, euthanasia, organ transplants, abortion, and medical confidentiality.

Canada: Bernard Dickens, professor in the Faculties of Law and Medicine at the University of Toronto, provides a brief but complete overview of virtually all the suggested topics, citing references to important Canadian texts and detailed policy descriptions.

Chile: Fernando Lolas, noted professor of psychophysiology at the University of Chile, briefly outlines the Chilean health system and the various bioethics activities carried out by the Colegio Médico de Chile, focusing on the professional ethical practices of physicians relative to other physicians, the public, and the State.

Colombia: Fernando Sánchez-Torres, professor of medicine and President of the Colombian Institute for Bioethical Studies, presents a frank overview of the state of bioethics in his country, devoting particular attention to limitations, possibilities, and the institutions involved in applying bioethics principals.

Mexico: José Kuthy Porter and Gabriel de la Escosura draw on extensive clinical experience to summarize principles of bioethics commonly observed in Mexico. The authors also discuss creation of research, ethics, and biosafety committees and touch on many of the eight suggested topics.

Peru: Roberto Llanos Zuloaga, professor of psychology at Cayetano Heredia University, touches on all the suggested topics, bringing to his discussion a realistic awareness of the cost and public nature of many of decisions involved—on matters such as euthanasia, abortion, and artificial insemination.

Spain: Francesc Abel, S.J., Director of the Borja Institute of Bioethics, furnishes an insightful overview of Spain in transition since the end of the Franco era, highlighting the influence of the Catholic Church, increased secularization since adoption of the 1978 Constitution, and bioethics work performed by Spain’s medical schools, a variety of authors, and several centers of bioethics.

United States: The complex 30-odd years of bioethics’ history in the United
States are succinctly described by Daniel Callahan, Director of the prestigious Hastings Center, who suggests that the leading current bioethics issues in the U.S. involve (1) patients' rights and autonomy, (2) the sanctity of life versus the quality of life, (3) interventions into nature, (4) allocation of resources, and (5) the role of public decision-making.

The next section, a “Round Table” presentation, deals with a difficult and universally important question: What is a just health services system and how should scarce resources be allocated? No specific answers are attempted. Rather, differing philosophic perspectives and traditions, both historic and current, are described by three leading bioethicists (Gracia, Drane, and Mainetti) whose additional individual contributions appear elsewhere in this publication.

This is followed by an Annotated Bibliography that includes a broad selection of classic works representing differing schools of thought and a few leading recent publications. The reader is also advised to refer to the varied and numerous works cited in endnotes by individual authors.

Finally, a documentary Appendix provides reprints of selected international codes of ethics, research codes of ethics, patients' bills of rights, and international texts relating to health as a human right. (This section also lists the names and addresses of a number of international centers of bioethics.) Unless otherwise specified, inclusion of these documents in this work does not imply or constitute their endorsement by PAHO or WHO.

This publication, while not exhaustive, is designed to serve as an introduction to bioethics in the Americas. Of course, we have not worked alone on this effort. In addition to the writings, encouragement, and dedication provided by the contributors, we have received extraordinary assistance from three people without whom this work simply would not have been produced. These are, first, Diego Gracia, the teacher, scholar, physician, and humanist who helped us design the work and gave unstintingly of his experience and contacts in the Spanish-speaking world; second, the theologian, philosopher, and teacher James S. Drane who provided invaluable expertise and technical insight, and whose commitment is such that he has dedicated his sabbatical leave to PAHO, where he is serving as our first resident bioethicist; and third, our Director, Carlyle Guerra de Macedo, who with customary imagination and foresight has supported and encouraged this foray by PAHO (and its Legal Office) outside its traditional areas into this rich and provocative field of the future.