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Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
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联合国教育、  
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## Bioethics

Stem cell research, genetic testing, cloning: progress in the life sciences is providing with new power to improve health and control the development processes of all living species. A new word has been coined to encompass the social, cultural, legal and ethical concerns: bioethics.

Since the 1970s, the field of bioethics has grown considerably. While it is true that bioethics today includes medical ethics issues, its originality lies in the fact that it goes much further than the professional codes of ethics concerned. It entails reflection on societal changes and even the global impact of scientific and technological advances. To the already difficult question posed by life sciences – How far can we go? – other queries must be added concerning the relationship between ethics, science and freedom.

UNESCO's ethical watch mandate is becoming increasingly necessary in light of recent scientific developments and their far-reaching implications for society. Founded on the belief that there can

be no peace without the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind, UNESCO strives to involve all countries in this inevitably international and transcultural discussion.

UNESCO has been promoting reflection on the ethics of life at the international level since the 1970s, and it was in 1993 that the Organization began to develop a bioethics programme. Since 2002, as part of the ethics of science and technology, it is one of the five priorities of the Organization.

### International intellectual forum

The bioethics programme provides an international intellectual forum for multidisciplinary, pluralistic and multicultural reflection on bioethics and aims at fostering both national and

international debate on the major ethical issues arising from recent developments in the life sciences and their applications in order to work out ethical guidelines for the international community and Member States.

Two advisory bodies work hand in hand to assist the Organization in promoting

reflection on the ethical and legal issues raised by research in the life sciences and their applications and in carrying out activities in the field at international level, as well as at regional and national levels:

- the **International Bioethics Committee (IBC)**, composed of 36 independent experts and which has been distinguished since its foundation by its

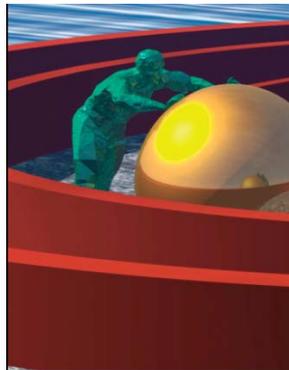
multidisciplinary and multicultural membership and the transparency of its work;

- the **Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee (IGBC)**, composed of 36 representatives of Members States.

### Standard-setting action

Over recent years, due to the growing number of scientific practices that go beyond national boundaries, the need to set universal ethical benchmarks covering issues raised within the field of bioethics and the need to work together towards bringing out common values have characterized more and more the international debate.

Standard-setting action in the field of bioethics has become a necessity felt throughout the world, often expressed



In 2005, UNESCO adopted the Declaration on Bioethics and Human rights  
(© UNESCO)

# Bioethics

## The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005)

Although in the eyes of international law the Universal Declaration constitutes a non-binding instrument, its value and its strength are in no way diminished. For the first time in the history of bioethics, all States of the international community have solemnly committed themselves to respect and apply the basic principles of bioethics. The Declaration deals with ethical issues raised by medicine, life sciences and associated technologies as applied to human beings, taking into account their social, legal and environmental dimensions.

Its aim is rather to constitute a basis for States wishing to endow themselves with legislation or policies in the field of bioethics. It also aims to inscribe scientific decisions and practices within the framework and respect of a certain number of general principles common to all. And it aims to foster dialogue within societies on the implications of bioethics and the sharing of knowledge in the field of science and technology.

Apart from the already well-established principles in the scientific community such as the principle of autonomy and individual responsibility, respect for privacy and confidentiality, the Declaration raises the issues of access to quality health care and essential medicines, nutrition and provision of clean water, to the improvement of living conditions and the environment and the reduction of poverty.

by scientists and practitioners themselves, as well as by legislators and citizens. This is why, for the past ten years, UNESCO has undertaken actions to involve all countries in this international discussion in order to bring out fundamental principles common to all, with respect for cultural diversity. The **Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights** adopted in 1997 marked the first major success of the bioethics programme of UNESCO and was followed in 2003 by the adoption of the **International Declaration on Human Genetic Data** and in 2005 by the adoption of the **Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights**.

After a period of intensive standard-setting action, UNESCO is now focusing its action on **supporting implementation at regional and national levels**, with special attention to developing countries. UNESCO co-organized, for example, the First Bioethics Days for West and Central Africa on "What Ethics for Research in Africa?" from 11 to 13 July 2005 in Dakar (Senegal). This meeting aimed to strengthen the debate on ethical issues raised in a continent where the health sector faces great economic and social challenges.

In 2004, UNESCO celebrated the opening of a Regional Bioethics Centre in Vilnius (Lithuania), in order to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, build up local expertise and stimulate the development of ethical debate and analysis nationally and regionally.

Three major project activities are planned to strengthen capacity-building, ethical reflection, awareness-raising and dissemination of the principles set forth in the Declarations:

- **the Global Ethics Observatory** (GEObs, see the sheet 44) constitutes an information tool freely accessible online to Member States and the general public aiming at developing a worldwide network of databases in bioethics and other areas of applied ethics;

- **the Ethics Education Programme** (EEP) aims at encouraging and supporting Member States to develop teaching programmes in bioethics. More particularly, it will provide assistance to Member States to promote ethics programmes, to set up infrastructure for creating and implementing teaching programmes, to identify the resources required for implementing ethics programmes and to create a fellowship fund;

- **through the Assisting Bioethics Committees** (ABC) project UNESCO continues its efforts and action in promoting the establishment of national bioethics committees. Within the framework of the ABC project, Member States in need of bioethics committees at national level will find assistance and support for the establishment of such committees and, once they are established, for the enhancement of the functioning of committees.

### Contact

Henk ten Have

Division of Ethics of  
Science and Technology

1, rue Miollis  
75732 Paris Cedex 15 –  
France  
Phone : + 33 (0) 1 45 68  
38 14  
Fax : +33 (0)1 45 68 55 15

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