

## Bioethics and the future

It is too early to say where bioethics is going in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because we are still in its first years and all the prophecies made so far have failed to come true. However, given recent scientific developments and their use by biology and related areas, it is clear that there is a growing need to show more respect for bioethics around the world.

Advances in knowledge and the scientific accomplishments of molecular biology and genomics, not to mention proteomics, have raised problems for decision-making in professional and academic practice that urgently require a strong moral position to be taken - an ethics that takes into account our fellow human beings, the environment, and future generations. There will be a high price to be paid by all for any misstep, slip-up, or wrong call. Such issues include stem-cell research, cloning, abortion, genetic manipulation, and so forth.

Furthermore, interest is also growing in the ethical principles and theories underpinning every moral decision. This has been studied throughout history by philosophers<sup>1,2</sup> (such as Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham) and, since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars have been investigating this issue scientifically, even experimentally, in a search for new basic principles for ethical decisions.

One example is the great Swiss psychologist and educationalist, Jean Piaget, who investigated the psychological reasons for moral behavior in an experimental fashion. More recently, Hoffman has studied the emotional factors involved in the feeling of justice and John Rawls has studied the reasons for the feeling of justice and equity. Likewise Marc Hauser, in 2006, used his so-called Trolley Problems to carry out experiments involving moral dilemmas.<sup>3,4</sup>

These researchers have shown that ethical dilemmas involve more than pure reason; they also involve empathy and a whole range of emotions. Antônio Damásio wrote an important book entitled "Descartes' Error,"<sup>5</sup> in which he shows that our thought processes and ethical decisions do not depend on reason alone, as the philosopher believed.

The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, approved by the General Assembly of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in October 2005 declares in its first article that:<sup>6</sup>

This Declaration addresses ethical issues related to medicine, life sciences and associated technologies as applied to human beings, taking into account their social, legal and environmental dimensions,

the Brazilian Journal of Mother and Child Health (BJMCH) is now entering this new era.

It is no coincidence that we are publishing this special edition dedicated to bioethics. On the one hand, it is an important way of marking the tenth anniversary of the Journal, which happens to coincide with the tenth year of the new century. We are deeply committed to publishing information on biomedical science, including its social and epidemiological aspects. Happily, and as is to be expected, many of the articles published in this edition deal with these issues.

This supplementary edition is, therefore, the BJMCH's contribution to this engaging subject, which is nicely summed up in the words of Edgar Morin: we are not going to stop doing science, but do 'science with a conscience'.<sup>7</sup>

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