

PRESS RELEASE

Europäische Akademie Medical Ethics Working Group:

What are the responsibilities of medical research regarding those in need of protection in developing countries?

Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, 31 August 2009. – Today, the Europäische Akademie’s Medical Ethics working group discussed the problem of whether and to what extent the Western world owes something to those in need of protection in developing countries if they contribute to medical progress. The following specific examples were used in order to explain the obligations of research organisations and doctors in developing countries: prostitutes in the Nairobi slums, impoverished Indonesian blood donors and bushmen in the Kalahari desert.

If competent adults in Germany assent to participate in medical research, e.g. by donating blood or DNA samples, this is not a matter of contention. These donors expose themselves to a minimal medical risk and receive prior professional consultation regarding risks. Should this research, in which they have participated, lead to new medical products or services, they would, as a matter of course, have access to those innovations.

Professor Doris Schröder, director of the Centre for Professional Ethics at the University of Central Lancashire in England, and presently visiting scientist at the Europäische Akademie, explained that for developing countries neither professional consultation nor the availability of the new products is guaranteed. Often there is a so-called “therapeutic misconception”. This means that the donor assumes to have received a definite therapeutic benefit from participation in a medical research programme. However, that is not the case.

Also, donors of blood or DNA samples for fundamental research cannot expect any personal benefits. Even if a new medication, e.g. a vaccine, has been developed successfully, the participants themselves often cannot afford it. This problem is particularly serious when people in developing countries are in

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need of a particular medication which has been developed with their help and is now only generally available in affluent countries.

Schröder clarified the Declaration of Helsinki's stance on this problem and why its articles regarding "Post-study obligations" are not sufficient: Although Article 33 regulates that all patients who participate in the research for new products must receive access to those products, this obligation is not assigned to anyone in particular. Therefore, it is mostly ignored by the pharmaceutical industry.

*The Europäische Akademie zur Erforschung von Folgen wissenschaftlich-technischer Entwicklungen Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler gGmbH was founded in 1996 by the Bundesland Rhineland-Palatinate (Land Rheinland-Pfalz) and the German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt e.V. – DLR). Managing director of the company as well as the director of the academy is Professor Dr. phil. Dr. phil.h.c. Carl Friedrich Gethmann, who is a full professor of applied philosophy at the Universität Duisburg-Essen. The Europäische Akademie is concerned with the scientific study of the consequences of scientific and technological advance for individual and social life and for the natural environment. The main focus is on the examination of foreseeable mid- and long-term processes that are especially influenced by natural- and engineering sciences and the medical disciplines. As an independent scientific institution, the Europäische Akademie pursues a dialogue with politics and society.
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