

Press Release

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National Ethics Committees from all over Europe met in Berlin

Berlin, 25.05.2007 – The 9th European Conference of National Ethics Committees (COMETH), initiated by the Council of Europe, chaired by Professor Daniel Tarschys, (Swedish National Ethics Committee), gathered representatives of National Ethics Committees from 38 European states on Wednesday 23 May in Berlin. The meeting took place at the invitation of the German National Ethics Council, chaired by Mrs Christiane Weber-Hassemer, and focused on the role of bioethics advisory bodies in a democratic debate.

Considering the speed of scientific developments, the participants underlined the importance of taking the necessary time to reflect and discuss on often complex ethical issues - a consideration which should precede any legislative initiative. They underlined the central role of national ethics committees in that respect.

Sharing their experiences, the representatives of the National Ethics Committees of Turkey, Georgia and Norway described their activities and showed their slightly different role in their respective national contexts. All participants emphasised the necessary pluralism, interdisciplinarity and independence of bioethics advisory bodies and identified as an important task promotion of a dialogue between society, scientists and decision makers. The experience gained in Europe with well-established ethics committees was acknowledged, and emphasis was put on its value for countries outside Europe, where such bodies do not always exist or have been newly established. The Head of the Bioethics Section of UNESCO suggested, in this context, that COMETH invites newly set up ethics committees from these countries to its next meetings.

The morning session was followed by the first joint session of COMETH with the European Union's Forum of National Ethics Councils (NEC Forum) on the theme of neurosciences. Professor Jean-Claude Ameisen (French National Consultative Ethics Committee) made a presentation focusing on the question: "Are we turning society's problem into medical ones?" Professor Karl Zilles (Director of the Institute of Medicine at the Jülich Research Center, Germany) talked about the recent developments in brain imaging.

During the discussion, emphasis was placed on the need not to neglect the social dimension when addressing medical problems. Furthermore, in relation to brain imaging, attention was drawn to the limit of medical sciences in particular when it comes to extrapolating its results into other fields such as criminal investigation.

In their conclusions, participants stressed the need for placing the notion of human rights at the centre of relations between medicine and society.

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