



Göran Hermerén: "Today's science fiction may be tomorrow's science"¹

Strasbourg, 25 April 2005

The European Conference of National Ethics Committees opens in Dubrovnik (Croatia) on 25 April. Göran Hermerén, Professor of Bioethics at Lund University (Sweden) and President of the European Commission's European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE), tells us about the main issues facing the conference.

Question: *The Council of Europe and the European Union both have bodies that discuss bioethics issues. How do they cooperate? Will they be required to work more closely together?*

Göran Hermerén: The European Group on Ethics benefits from the Council of Europe's human rights contributions and conventions. The Council helps us broaden the debate to cover the whole of Europe, because it is essential to speak with one voice. Bioethics problems are now global and the basic issues like the choice between economic and ethical priorities and the use of new technologies affect the entire world. In fifteen years, for instance, nanotechnologies will have revolutionised medicine with new methods for diagnosis and treatment. These techniques can also have military applications. Europe must look into these issues, because today's science fiction may be tomorrow's science...

And we must get ready right now to meet these challenges.

Question: *Among other scientific debates, the Dubrovnik conference will discuss preimplantation diagnosis to determine the compatibility of HLA antibodies. What does this method mean in practice?*

Göran Hermerén: When a couple have a child who is suffering from an incurable disease, one solution may be to conceive a second child from whom tissue or cells may be taken to save the first child, provided that the two children are "compatible". Preimplantation diagnosis with HLA determination ascertains this. It is still a more or less at the experimental stage and of course raises formidable ethical issues, especially as far as the second child's future is concerned. A child conceived for the purpose of "helping" its brother or sister can live normally and be loved for itself by its family, but we must nevertheless think about all the ethical implications of these methods.

Question: *Day two of the conference will focus on the ethics of ageing. Does this mean clarifying the rights and special features of older patients?*

Göran Hermerén: Yes, but it chiefly means discussing the consequences of ageing for health care systems and their financial balance. Nowadays people fall ill when they are 70 or 80, and while it is legitimate to look after them, the question is whether all the available funds must be allocated to them when this might mean depriving younger people of the care they need. So we have to devise ethical solutions to deal with this dilemma: should we increase taxes, or rather ask older patients' relatives to help pay for their care? Likewise, while it is essential to promote research into Alzheimer's disease, for example, should this mean sacrificing research into stem cells, prenatal screening or cancer?

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