

From the Editors

Intercultural, international, and interdisciplinary thinking is the next challenge of our time for bioethics. Within their own traditions, bioethicists are increasingly aware just how culture bound their ideas really are. Cultural myopia becomes obvious when those of us grounded in a tradition stressing autonomy and individual rights encounter persons doing bioethics in other cultures. These persons are almost mystified by the reverence we pay these notions, and we are astounded that they do not accept as givens our cultural standards as the most important features in resolving bioethics disputes.

In this issue's special section, "Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Healthcare Ethics," we explore some of the various beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations common to members of particular societies. To be ignorant of the framework through which people view their world, interpret events and behavior, and react to their perceived reality is the degree to which we fall short of being culturally competent. Cultural competence is a necessary component to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

In this issue of *CQ*, we focus in an initial way on the special dilemmas that occur when we begin to become self-critical about our cultural assumptions in bioethics, and we take up some very specific problems that occur for people with various cultural backgrounds who view practices in medicine that not only

seem nonsensical but even belligerent. In addition to the articles detailed by Guest Editor Kate Brown, other pieces throughout the issue complement the special section's theme. Both "The Caduceus in Court" and "Ethics Committees at Work" offer serious multicultural challenges to our comfortable assumptions of right and wrong, and the interview with Joseph Jacobs explores the mission and activities of the controversial Office of Alternative Medicine, within the National Institutes of Health.

Inevitably, as we strive to become culturally competent in healthcare ethics, the question arises whether right and wrong is relative to the culture in which we happen to live or whether there are universally valid moral rules that transcend time and place? One strategy to answer these questions is to point to the many impressive examples of how different societies have different moral rules – such as the ones featured in this issue of *CQ* – and then add the question, "In light of all this, how can we possibly believe that there are any such things as absolute, universally valid values?"

Reducing morality to the local customs of any particular culture is tempting because doing so seems tolerant and prevents cultural arrogance. Choosing that option, however, also carries a risk. For instance, if we say that all of the moral rules of a society are only the particular expressions of that society and its preferences, then when any question

of right and wrong arises we should be willing to settle the question in our own minds simply by considering what is believed in our own society – surely an anemic way of making moral judgments. Also, in reducing moral values to the local customs of a culture, we lose the power of reform or understanding the platform of a reformer in society – anyone trying to change the way things are done in a culture would automatically be wicked because to oppose the prevailing views of the culture would be wrong. We would also lose any possibility of progress in a society. Most of us assume that there is such a thing as moral and cultural progress; for example, we believe there has been improvement when a society moves from condoning slavery to condemning it. We want to say eliminating slavery is not just a change but a change for the better. The same is true about the movement to recognize the full equality of women, demands for stricter justifications for war, increased restrictions on the use of persons and animals in research, and so on.

This said, what do all the examples of diversity of moral rules show us? Straightaway, cultures do not disagree in their values nearly as much as it first appears; what we assume to be a difference in values often turns out, on closer inspection, to be not a difference in values but rather in practices. Actually, what impresses us when we look at different cultures are the differences in practices or customary actions between one culture and another. And what determines the practices of any culture are not only the values to which the culture subscribes but many other

things as well – such as the conditions and circumstances of life and the factual and religious beliefs that are current in a society – all these things taken together determine the kinds of practices in a society. Behind the diverse practices, though, are often basic and fundamental values that indicate more agreement than disagreement among societies.

Our efforts to develop cultural literacy in the diversity of moral rules and practices, if not a safeguard, is at least a buffer against taking the codes of our own society and mistakenly assuming them to be objectively valid. The essential part of the challenge of intercultural bioethics is to become much more critical about our own assumptions, and that does not occur in a vacuum. We must experience the dilemma faced by others so we do not fall into the obvious trap of cultural dominance and bigotry. At the same time, we must continue to search for those transcultural convictions and commitments that are necessary in bioethics. The dilemma facing today's international bioethicists is that we must learn to work together to identify our shared values while maintaining an open mind and gentle spirit with regard to the differences in social practices that separate us. This goal can only be achieved with a great deal of wisdom – wisdom that comes from acknowledging and incorporating the importance of culture, being vigilant towards the dynamics that result from cultural differences, and sharing an appreciation for the individual and the way that person fits into a social group. This is what we mean by cultural competence.