



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**FIRST MEETING OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND ARAB FORUM ON
BIOETHICS IN RESEARCH**

Cairo, Egypt, 12–14 August 2008

Distinguished experts from the Member States of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and the University of Maryland; dear colleagues, participants, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure for me to express my views to this august gathering of health researchers, ethicists and scholars from around the world. Bioethics has become in this century a truly international phenomenon, moving beyond academic discussions into politics, social policy and law. The recent integration of engineering with nanotechnology, stem cell biology and genomics is creating new and dramatic challenges in ethics, particularly when applied to solving health issues in many resource-poor countries, including countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, due to the weak bioethics infrastructure and capacity. This warrants exploration of the existing knowledge, and critical assessment of the viewpoints representing various segments of society in the countries of the Region. In other words, the regional bioethical viewpoint needs to reflect the widely varying bioethical issues reflected the cultural, religious, legal and political characteristics of our communities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Those who are using emerging biotechnologies and nanotechnologies, as well as investors in such technology, see exciting prospects in new medications, new agricultural crops, new materials, and new means of remediating environmental problems. These are, in short, the source of stupendous possibilities. But how do we get ethical clearance for new research? How do we regulate new technologies? How do we try to balance the costs and the benefits they will bring to us? Should we compromise with short-term economic benefits at the expense of moral and ethical values?

All of us have witnessed in our lives the fact that each opportunity affords an array of potential problems: unwanted side effects; unanticipated social costs, unforeseen public health and environmental risks. As well, in our pluralistic society, we are faced with a wonderful diversity of values and ideas, but it is not always easy to ascertain which values take precedence and which ethical dilemmas need our most immediate attention. In the not-too-distant past, almost all of the health research ethics which a researcher had to deal with were confined to the very personal relationship and interaction between researcher and his/her subject; whatever else existed in the field was minimal and of little concern. Today, however, the framework of health research ethics has been expanded to include much more, such as issues with insurance companies, funding agencies and the privacy of medical records. We can either try to address these issues in advance or we can wait until a crisis occurs and we are forced to deal with it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Activities related to bioethics are not new in our Region. An Advisory Committee on Bioethics was convened under the aegis of the Council for International Organization of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) in 1976, to act as a focus for collaboration between WHO's Regional Advisory Committee on Health Research and CIOMS. The Regional Office discussed the need to establish guidelines for ethical review procedures as early as 1978. Since then many countries of the Region have been developing a core ethical framework for health care and research ethics. The Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences (IOMS) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are the two leading entities currently at the forefront of advocating and increasing awareness of the need for developing ethical review mechanisms in the Region. Recently, the Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation of the Organization of the Islamic

Conference (COMSTECH) established an Advisory Committee for Bioethics with members from different Islamic countries. ISESCO has also been actively promoting ethical norms and values in the Region.

The focus of the WHO's drive to strengthen regional bioethics capacities is through advocacy consultations, technical meetings, seminars, workshops and research at national and regional level activities and in partnership with interested stakeholders. The Regional Office has carried out short-term training programmes within Region and in partnership with the University of Toronto, Canada, has funded a programme to train health care professionals from the Region for a Masters degree in bioethics. A similar short-term training programme has been initiated in collaboration with the University of Maryland, United States of America. In addition, the Regional Office engages with international organizations such as CIOMS, IOMS, ISESCO, UNESCO and other partners to organize international meetings and seminars on key issues related to bioethics.

In the current biennium (2008–2009) the Regional Office has several activities planned to strengthen national capacity in ethical review of research for health. Earlier this year a regional expert meeting was held to develop regional guidelines for ethics of embryo research in collaboration with IOMS, ISESCO, and UNESCO. This first Forum on Bioethics for the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO and Arab Region of UNESCO is the second major event this year. Other planned activities include: mapping of the infrastructure for ethical review of research in the Region; technical support to Member States to establish national ethics review committees; and the second regional meeting for national bioethics committees.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is important that each country implements bioethical standards in different aspects of life to protect people, their life, dignity and well-being. The gap between developed countries and developing countries is huge with regard to application of bioethics, and is widening further. We cannot afford to remain indifferent to emerging ethical issues related to health research and humans. We should be prepared to ask difficult questions about what is done with new technologies and how health professionals and researchers operate. We all have an important stake in these answers. We all deserve good answers.

Once again, I am grateful to the organizers of this meeting for giving me the opportunity to express my views on the subject. I congratulate all of you on the establishment of this important forum on bioethics for the Eastern Mediterranean and Arab Region and wish you a very successful meeting.

Thank you.