In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the

REGIONAL MEETING OF NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEES
JOINTLY ORGANIZED BY UNESCO-CAIRO AND EMRO/WHO

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the first regional meeting of national bioethics committees in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. This occasion marks the birth of a novel collaboration between WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean and the UNESCO Office for the Arab Region. I trust that the richness of the combined experiences of the two United Nations organizations in the field of bioethics will help strengthen regional bioethics programmes in order to be able to cope with the emerging bioethical challenges being faced by this Region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With increasing globalization and digitization, medical sciences are undergoing revolutionary changes. Population health is broadening its scope in recognition of the intrinsic genetic factors that affect disease risk, in addition to the socioeconomic,
environmental and behavioural determinants of health. The recent integration of engineering with nanotechnology, stem cell biology and genomics is creating new and dramatic ethics challenges. Unfortunately, this recent growth in biomedical and health-related research activities has not been accompanied by a corresponding enhancement of the bioethics infrastructure in many resource-poor countries, including the countries in our region.

As generally understood, bioethics is concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships between life sciences, biotechnology, medicine, politics, law, philosophy, environment and theology. Thus, bioethics has a comprehensive scope, including human health and life, and animal and vegetable life; in other words, it is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, involving all aspects of life. Over the past 30 years, bioethics has grown as an academic discipline, as the world tries to keep up with the rapid advances in science, including medical science. It has emerged as a discipline in many academic medical centres, schools of philosophy, law, engineering, liberal arts and other academic institutions. Today it is all but impossible to create a major medical research project without ethicists, not only to assist in the regulatory review of proposed research, but also to consider in advance the social, ethical and economic implications of proposed research.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The questions begged by bioethics as a distinct area of academic inquiry are largely answered by the needs of institutions. In addition, an increasing number of nations have created official national ethics bodies or committees. The main functions of these national ethics committees are to analyse and offer conclusions and recommendations about current issues in bioethics, and the ethics of health more generally, especially as such issues bear on potential needs to develop national policies and to adopt legislation.

It is a fact that each country needs to implement bioethical standards in different aspects of life to protect people, their life, dignity and wellbeing. To date, there have been numerous examples of exploitative practices associated with biomedical research in developing countries that have weak infrastructure for the ethical review of research. The
gap between developed countries and developing countries regarding application of bioethics is huge, and is widening further. Developing countries need to incorporate bioethical standards in development activities to ensure better life of their people. We may be able to use imported technologies, drugs and other goods provided by developed countries, but bioethics standards and applications need to be developed and shaped according to the culture and norms of each community. For example, the structure of the ethics review system in the industrialized countries might not be applicable in many other countries.

In October 2002, WHO launched its Ethics and Health Initiative to provide a focal point for the examination of the ethical issues raised by activities throughout the organization, including the regional and country offices, and to develop activities regarding a wide range of global bioethics topics, from organ and tissue transplantation to developments in genomics, and from research with human beings to equitable access to health services. Work in ethics and health is now carried out by the Department of Ethics, Trade, Human Rights and Health Law at headquarters. This department is involved in a wide range of ethics activities, and it provides the permanent secretariat for the Global Summit of National Bioethics Advisory Bodies, meeting most recently in Beijing in 2006.

At the regional level, the field of bioethics is still developing. In two studies conducted by the Regional Office, we found a general lack of application of ethical standards in medical research, as well as poor awareness of researchers concerning ethics of biomedical research. The large and diverse amount of biomedical research now being conducted in the Region has raised concerns about ethical conduct. In response, the Regional Office established the Eastern Mediterranean Region Research Ethics Committee (EMRREC) in March 2006. All research supported by the Regional Office has to be approved by the EMRREC. The Committee is devoted to protecting human participants in such research. The Committee also provides technical support to the Member States, to develop, build and strengthen national ethical oversight procedures and mechanisms, develop guidelines and serve as the Regional Office’s link to the global efforts in the field of medical ethics.
To help in capacity-building in Member States in the field of bioethics, a joint venture was begun with the University of Toronto for co-funding of training in bioethics. Four people have now completed a Masters Degree in bioethics and another four are expected to by the end of 2008. At the same time, a short-term training programme on bioethics was also initiated this year in collaboration with the University of Maryland, USA. A 3-day programme was developed to train participants in Sudan and Jordan on medical ethics and to establish ethics review committees and, as a result, 56 participants were trained this year. The Regional Office has also supported candidates from Member States to participate in important ethics meetings and conferences. For example, four participants from the Region were supported to attend the Global Summit in Beijing in 2006 and six were supported to participate in the Eighth Asian Bioethics Conference in Bangkok in 2007.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a lot to be done to improve the situation in the Region. Resources need to be allocated and better utilized to strengthen the field of bioethics. Countries of the Region are in serious need of intensive and urgent training programmes, both to provide information and to train experts to take the lead in promoting adherence to ethical standards in research. Over the coming period, the Regional Office has planned to increase its activities in technical support in the area of bioethics, and to strengthen its ties with international and national bodies to promote ethics in health.

Once again, I am grateful to the organizers of this meeting for giving me the opportunity to meet you and I wish you a successful meeting.

Thank you.