

## **Ethics in Neurology and Psychiatry: an Introduction**

Franz Gerstenbrand

Ethical consciousness begins with the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle developed it into a science. Attainment of happiness was the main objective of Greek ethics. Thomas Aquinas incorporated Christian ethics with a God-given natural order. Kant's categorical imperative applies to every human person: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law". In the last century various European schools created different interpretations of ethical principles: existentialistic ethics, the value ethics, the Marxist ethics, etc. The declaration of Helsinki (1964) with its several amendments specifies general ethical principles for medical research. The European Biomedicine Convention (1997) of the Council of Europe provides a framework for biology and medicine within the European concepts of human rights and human dignity.

The so called Western bioethical principles do not include the ethical rules of Buddhism and Confucianism, which stress the well being of the community more than the well feeling of the individual. Ethical guidelines for all of mankind have to respect social conditions, local traditions and culture, religious believes as well as national and regional laws. "Western ethics" follow the demands of modern technology strictly observing the basic principles of human rights and human dignity. These bioethical principles influence the obligations of physicians as well as medical research involving human subjects.

Ethical guidelines for neurologists and psychiatrists have to include the rules for clinical trials including the obligation to consult Ethics Committees. These bodies have to balance the benefit for the patient and a patient community against the risk of an individual. The Ethic Committee has to check whether there is an adequate insurance coverage for trial subjects in case of damage.

Guidelines for the rights of patients not able to consent, for end of life decision (withdrawing or withholding of treatment) and for brain death have to be prepared as well as for implantation of embryonic tissue or stimulating devices. The Helsinki declaration has to be interpreted in a practical way.

Most neurologists and psychiatrists have only a rough knowledge about the Helsinki convention and its different amendments as well as of the rules for good clinical practise (GCP) etc. It is increasingly important to develop and use pre- and post-graduate teaching programs to educate physicians in the ethics of Neurology and Psychiatry.