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NEUROLOGY IN PRACTICE

Neuroethics Research Group: Guiding EOL Challenges

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The World Federation of Neurology's Neuroethics Research Group was founded as an ad hoc committee for neuroethics in 2001, and its status was changed to that of Research Group the following year. Neuroethics covers a range of ethical and social issues that can arise in the neurosciences, from clinical research to daily neurological practice. Its tenets are rooted in the Hippocratic principles, but over the years, other concepts from documents such as the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the World Medical Association's 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, and the 2005 Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights have been incorporated. From this point of view, neuroethics is not a research field—no details have to be discovered; nothing can be removed.

Although the principles of modern-day neuroethics are well-established and widely documented, ethical thinking and practice still present a challenge for neurologists. One example of such a challenge would be the increasing involvement of neurologists in end-of-life (EOL) decisions, especially when they have to act on a legal judgment.

One of the main activities of the Neuroethics Research Group has been to organize teaching and training courses in ethics for neurologists. In this regard, the WFN Research Group is participating in a special interest group for neuroethics in collaboration with the World Federation for NeuroRehabilitation (WFNR). It is also working closely with the International Society for Amelioration of Quality of Life in Chronic Neurological Conditions, chaired by Dr. Stavros I. Baloyannis of the Aristotelian University in Thessalonika, Greece, to develop a program for the treatment and care of chronic neurological patients, such as apallic patients or those who are in a vegetative state. The need for such a program was highlighted by the cases of two women—an American and an Italian—in which courts granted permission for hydration and nutrition to be withdrawn, but the ethics of such actions was hotly debated.

In September 2008, a workshop on neuroethics was held during the World Congress of NeuroRehabilitation in Brasilia, Brazil, and another will be held this year at the World Congress of Neurology in Bangkok.

In addition, the Research Group and the special interest group for neuroethics at the WFNR are preparing a teaching course that will be presented at the

WFNR's world congress in Vienna in March next year.

The Research Group receives no outside financial support, because we believe it would be unethical to ask the pharmaceutical or the electronic industries to support a teaching course or a workshop for neuroethics. The WFN's Management Committee has allotted funds to cover the costs of the Research Group's teaching courses and its other activities.

The Research Group is about to begin work on an important project—compilation of a transcultural adaptation of the current ethical directives in neurology.

The existing directives are based on historical and religious rules of European civilization, the philosophy of Aristotle, and the influences of the Christian philosoph-

ical teachings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. These "Western ethical rules" should not be imposed on different cultural and religious communities—rather, the principles should be adapted so that they apply worldwide. As such, the Research Group is working closely with various ideological and religious institutions for their input and guidance on how best to approach this task. This raises the question, however, as to whether the Research Group on Neuroethics should be organized as a Special Committee for Ethical Principles in Neurology. ■

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