



PANDÉMIES, ÉTHIQUE, SOCIÉTÉ



Cyprus National Bioethics committee's reflection

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The present speech is aimed at presenting the outcome of a meeting of experts which took place two years ago to address the *“main bioethical concerns arising from the Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plan of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Cyprus”*. The fact that our island doubles its population every summer has to be stress when we debate on such matter. What are the main features of the policy we established? Both duty and outcome-oriented considerations (such as utility and justice) can be incorporated into preparedness plans.

Choosing driving principles and a strategy

The fact that a large range of ethical options exist is notorious. We can insist on utility, efficiency, fairness, liberty or society values to do the greatest good possible. Moreover, Cyprus added to these four principles an important reference to the Christian tradition. Complying with it, massive bodies incineration would be totally unacceptable in our country as we greatly value burial traditions.

Charles Rosenberg has depicted an epidemic as a drama in four acts:

- a *“progressive revelation”* in which members of a community begin to acknowledge casualties resulting from the spread of a particular contagious disease
- a stage of *“managing randomness”* in which community members seek explanations (often supernatural ones) for the apparent arbitrariness of the infection;
- a *“negotiating public response”* stage in which community members demand collective action ;

-a “*subsidence and retrospection*” outcome often leading to complacency as the memory of the epidemic fades in the community.

And given that we should quote Abraham Lincoln: “*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present ... The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise to the occasion ... As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew.*”

Looking at a pandemic diagram, we see that managing such an event would mean dealing with peaks. At a large scale, the first collective goal would consist in prolonging peak latency to spare time. Thus, it would be easier to face the second peak of the pandemic. Sparing time during the first peak would allow sparing lives during the second.

The Swiss plan pattern

In the field of prioritization of access to treatment – especially vaccines – we should reject every form of discrimination. It has been proclaimed that Cypriots should have equitable access to therapeutic resources with all other European Citizens.

Given that, Cyprus’ geographical situation is between Europe and the Middle East. It is touristic place. Increasing numbers of northern Europeans chose to retire in Cyprus, thus increasing the percentage of older population which carries a higher risk of death when it comes to severe sepsis and multi-organ dysfunction. We know mortality from severe sepsis is vastly worse at the extremes of age.

Regarding the allocation of scarce resources, we can look at the content of the Swiss preparedness plan. Three separated phases have been pointed out. During the first one, everybody who needs treatment will get it. A “first come, first served” logic will be applied. Of course during this first stage ICU units will be much challenged.

The second phase begins with the obvious impossibility to treat everybody. Then scarce resources will have to be allocated to those whose health conditions are the most jeopardized. This brings forward the problem of a reliable tool to select among people. Following some WHO recommendations, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, national origin, social or economic status must not be operative criteria.

The third and last phase of the Swiss plan copes with war-like situations. Scarce resources should be reserved for patients with life-threatening conditions. When all those can no longer be treated, priority will be given to those who are expected to have the best chance of survival. Treatments will be withdrawn only from those who are unlikely to benefit from it. Finally, individuals with poor prognoses will be given palliative treatment. At this point, it must be underlined that observed survival does not overlap with predicted survival¹. This is particularly true when doctors are prone to act on the basis of emotion.

A lot of issues have to be tackled to be ethically prepared

Safeguarding citizens’ basic rights is one key goal during a pandemic. The fate of some groups would be highly problematic. Illegal immigrants have to be mentioned there. They often do not have

¹ Christakis et al, BMJ 2000; 320:469–73.

sufficient hygiene conditions of life, a factor that could be fatal in terms of expansion of a pandemic. Additionally, illegal immigrants, if infected, may not seek medical advice for fear of being arrested.

For Cyprus, restricting population mobility is a major topic. Our government should cooperate with other EU member states and other neighbouring countries, in an effort to draft a memorandum of cooperation in the event, setting out the possible travel restrictions in the entry and exit points of each country.

A few more key issues have to be tackled before a major pandemic occurs:

- the protection of human dignity of deceased persons;
- the regulation of medical samples exportation;
- access to ICU resources (especially ventilation capacities).

And who will organize vaccines distribution and administration? It is our bioethics committee's opinion that the state should set up a transparent policy of vaccination given the potential shortage of these resources.

In the field of vaccination prioritization, we noticed that decision makers and healthcare workers proposed to vaccinate themselves... Basically, this is a rational suggestion but maybe it should have been debated. A wide discussion would have dispelled a criticism the accusation of "vaccination priority setting as privileges setting". As Protagoras said, "*the ultimate measure of all objects is the human being*". Whatever we can think, Europe's duty remains to safeguard our children's future in an unstable world through sustainable and ethical practices.