



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

ITALIAN NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

SUICIDES IN PRISON. BIOETHICAL INDICATIONS

(25th June 2010)

abstract

In the sitting of 25 June 2010 the National Bioethics Committee (NBC) approved the opinion 'Suicides in prison. Bioethical indications', the result of a working group coordinated by Prof. Grazia Zuffa.

The NBC considers that the high suicide rate in the prison population, which is far greater than that of the general population, is a problem of considerable ethical and social importance, aggravated by conditions of prison overcrowding and the frequent recourse to incarceration. The fresh outbreak of this phenomenon in 2009 and during the first months of 2010 makes it increasingly urgent to bring the attention of the institutions and public opinion to this situation.

Even if the act of killing oneself bears a definite element of individual responsibility, the community's responsibility is called upon to remove all those situations linked to custody which, besides the unbearable hardship of the loss of freedom, may foster or hasten the decision to take one's own life.

The appeal to social responsibility is reinforced by the consideration of the particular bio-psycho-social vulnerability of the prison population with respect to the general one (the prisoners are younger, more affected by illness, poorer, less socially and culturally integrated). Hence the moral duty to 'guarantee a prison environment that respects people and leaves open a prospect of hope and a horizon of development of subjectivity in the journey towards social reintegration'; before this however there is the moral duty to critically reassess the penal policies that are the very cause of overcrowding, since as they stand they go directly against the principle of the humanity of punishment. The Committee put forward the question as to whether prison, as it is today, respects the principle according to which custody can only suspend the right to liberty, without taking away other fundamental rights (like those to health, to reintegration and the right to serve a sentence that does not degrade human dignity), pointing out that in many cases there is a contradiction between the exercise of these rights and the application of custody that forces people to regress, in the absence of goals, and in some cases to be subjected to violence.

The NBC recommends that the competent authorities draw up a national plan of action for the prevention of prison suicides, along the lines set out by the European bodies. The plan should foresee indications:

for the development of a system of punishment that is closer to the constitutional principles (new regulations for the introduction of important non-custodial sentences and the full application of the already existing norms that make alternatives to prison possible, like those for drug addicts);

for a greater transparency of prison regulations and an increased personalisation of treatment, countering the 'deresponsibilising' and 'infantilising' practices that degrade and reduce the detainees to helplessness;

for a specific prevention not so much aimed at the selection of subjects at suicide risk as at the timely identification of and intervention in situations at risk that can cross the prisoners'

'resistance threshold' (such as the psychological impact of being arrested, the trauma of imprisonment etc);

for the development of the monitoring and research of the phenomenon and for the specific training of prison workers starting with the examination of the single cases of suicide.