



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

PAIN THERAPY: BIOETHICAL GUIDELINES

(30th March 2001)

abstract

The NBC deals with the subject of pain therapy perceived as cure and care aimed at controlling physical suffering and providing psychosocial support to the patient, with particular reference to the terminal phase of life. The reflection is prompted by the finding of significant omissions in the healthcare system and in the practice of medicine. It is noted in particular that compared to the indicators set by the WHO for the implementation of an effective analgesia, Italy occupies one of the last places in European ranking.

The document, after having recalled the multiple physiological and ethical meanings of pain, points out that the fight against pain pertains to the entire history of medicine. It summarizes the principle legislative guidelines on the subject and emphasises the varying importance that pain management has in a variety of clinical situations (in the terminal phase of life, after an operation, during childbirth, and in pediatrics).

The NBC, in its bioethical recommendations, underlines that, for pain therapy to become a tangible and widespread reality, legislative, clinical, and educational guidelines are needed. In particular, it draws attention to the following points:

- health workers must acquire and take into account the point of view of patients – their values, their preferences, their conception of life and health – in taking clinical decisions;
- the amount of pain relief, considered in relation to the limitations that it may have on conscience and the actual length of life, is to be assessed in the light of the idea of “the quality of life” which each person has the right to subjectively formulate;
- in relation to the request for pain therapy awareness and responsibility constitute an essential dimension in the promotion of human rights, even in conditions of illness and need;
- pain therapy is an integral part of what a person can and should expect from medicine and healthcare services.