HEALTH PROMOTION, ISLAMIC ETHICS AND LAW IN IRAN

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ABSTRACT

Health statistics demonstrate remarkable progresses in the field of primary health care and academic education in Iran within recent decades. Iran has also had obvious progresses in the field of research and the International publication rate of Iranian scientists has been quadrupled over the past decade. Progresses in biomedical researches have been associated with considerable activities in bioethics education, research and legislation. Organ transplantation, stem cell research, assisted reproductive technologies and genetics are some important instances of ethical debates in our country. In this concise manuscript we intend to present some recent progresses in science and research in Iran. Considering importance of the bioethical issues, we will also review new legislations in the field of bioethics.

Keywords: Health care, Education, Bioethics, Law, Islamic ethics, Islam, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Great strides have been made in the field of primary health care and academic education in Iran within recent decades (1, 2). Health statistics demonstrate remarkable progresses. Life expectancy has increased; infant, maternal mortality and population growth rates have decreased (2, 3). Currently Iran is one of the countries with low child and adult mortality rate in the Eastern Mediterranean region (3). The number of academic students has also increased to more than 10 times in the past 20 years. There is also an evident rise in the number of individuals studying as professional doctorate, specialists, and PhD in these years (4), and more than half of the students are women. In keeping with points mentioned above Iran has also had obvious progress in the field of research. The International publication rate of Iranian scientists has been quadrupled over the past decade (5). In 2003, Iranian scientists published 3277 papers in international journals, an amazing 30-fold increase over 1985 (6). Iran's contribution to global scientific output rose from 0.0003% in 1970 to 0.29% in 2003, with much of the growth occurring since the early 1990s (7). On the other hand, a lot of articles published in Iranian journals that nearly none of them were indexed in the ISI or Medline. Although current number of yearly scientific publication is relatively low but the average impact factor seems to be quite satisfactory (1) considering some difficulties that the Iranian scientists have been facing such as difficulties for providing modern equipments and the low ratio of Gross domestic Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (4).

Islamic Ethics and Legislations

Progresses in biomedical researches have been associated with issues regarding ethical aspects of the new knowledge. Therefore, great activities are carried out in ethics education, research and legislation in Iran (8-11). Genetics, organ transplantation, and stem cell research are some of the important issues that have raised ethical debates. Religious faiths and cultural, have influences on these issues in our country. The principles of bioethics and solutions to ethical problems are therefore derived from the Islamic legal rules (10,11). There have been positive Fatwa(s) [a religious opinion about whether an action is permissible or not] about bioethical issues such as stem cell research, organ transplantation, abortion, and genetic research in Iran. Some of them have o been implemented into laws by the parliament in the recent years. The religious leaders’ authentication has had great emphasis on governmental support of researchers and scientific centers.

The consensus of physicians and religious leaders in the Islamic Republic of Iran paved the way for evolution a nationwide organ transplantation program. Given the organ scarcity, Living Unrelated Renal Donation (LURD) as a legalized, well-controlled program was adapted in 1988. In this regard, the Iranian government undertook to reimburse a reward to donors via charity organs in 1997 (12-14). As a

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result; the renal transplant waiting list was eliminated in 1999 in the country. On the other hand, parliament approved the "Deceased or Brain Dead Patients Organ Transplantation Act" (15). By virtue of this law, organs and tissues of cadaver and brain-dead people are used for transplantation with her/his trust or with the consent of the family, after definite establishment of brain death by specialists (8,16). Consequently, annual rate of organ transplantation from deceased donors has been increased from 0.3 Per Million of Population (pmp) in 2000 to 1.7 pmp in 2004 (17).

Likewise, parliament approved the "Embryo Donation to Infertile Spouses Act" in 2003 (18). In conformity with the Act; the donation of embryos is permitted under certain conditions. Recently, Parliament ratified the "Therapeutic Abortion Act" (19). Based on this act, therapeutic abortion would be permitted by virtue of definite diagnosis of three specialists and confirmation of Forensic Medicine Organization (FMO), based upon fetal diseases leading to mother affliction because of fetus retardation or malformation, or based upon life-threatening maternal diseases. Abortion could be carried out merely before ensoulment (4 month after conception) by woman's consent. FMO has defined 51 fetal and maternal disorders that could be included in this bill. Compilation of the National Ethical Guidelines in the different fields of biomedical research (including ethical guidelines for clinical trial, research on minors, genetic research, gamete and embryo research, organ and tissue transplantation research, and research on animals) is the other activity accomplished in our country in recent years (20).

There is no absolute restriction on genetic research in Iran. Moral principles and ethical codes should, however, be completely followed, particularly for individual autonomy, informed consent, relative risk assessment, confidentiality and privacy (8). Reproductive cloning is prohibited in Iran but embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning have been approved by the religious authorities. Therefore, some projects in these fields have recently carried out under special supervision and Iranian researchers of Royan Institute reported the derivation of a new embryonic stem cell line (Royan H1) from a human blastocyst (21). The first transgenic animal in Iran will be also born in coming months. Islamic perspective on this issue is discussed in another article (22). The moral status of the human embryo is the most sensitive and disputed point in this debate (22). Meanwhile, an expert clinical medicine practice requires an experience of ethical issues, which are clearly culture-based; therefore, attempts for strengthening contemporary ethics should be followed by appropriate educational programs. Recently this goal has been enhanced by implementation of nationwide strategic planning of medical ethics (23). Postgraduate educational courses in medical ethics were designed and developed by Ministry of Health such as establishment of MPH course (with medical ethics tendency) and providing required background for establishing PhD in medical ethics.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it should be mentioned that Islamic ethics not only has unlimited fields of biomedical researches in Iran but also has emphasized researchers to reflect arrays of sciences in country. Obviously being in touch with other countries could be useful for establishment of an integrated Islamic medical ethics networks, given the fundamental variations in socio-cultural values in different cultures.

REFERENCES