World Ethics Body Proposed

A United Nations group concerned with medical sciences has recommended the creation of an international, nongovernmental body to explore the moral and social issues raised by new and forthcoming developments in biology and medicine.

The Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), an offspring of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Unesco, passed the resolution at a Round Table Conference held in Paris early this month.

The proposed body would be a step toward recognizing and attempting to cope with—on an international basis—pressing ethical problems relating to abortion, prolongation of life, utilization of scarce medical resources, and priorities in medical research and technology.

Amitai Etzioni, director of the Center for Policy Studies in New York, says the new body would be made up of equal parts biologists and medical people, humanists and social scientists, and theologians.

A typical question the organization might ponder, says Etzioni, is the circumstances under which amniocentesis (drawing fluid out of the womb to determine whether the fetus has a genetic disorder) should be performed. The organization might lay down the principle that all pregnant women over age 40 (when the chances of bearing a Mongoloid child are high) should be told—in countries where abortion is legal—that amniocentesis is advisable. There might also be guidelines to prevent a woman who wanted a child of a certain sex from using the procedure with the intention of getting an abortion if the sex didn't suit her.

The commission might also influence policy-makers in determining biomedical research priorities. A country might not be so quick to support research on in vitro fertilization of eggs or technology leading to a new life-prolonging device if it were advised by a prestigious international body of the dangerous ramifications and new ethical dilemmas such research would open up.

The commission would have only its prestige to lend force to its guidance, but Etzioni thinks its existence would encourage governments to sponsor similar efforts on a national basis. At present, many private groups, particularly in England and the United States, are attempting to foster interdisciplinary studies of ethics in science and medicine. But only in the United States, where technology assessment is further advanced than it is anywhere else, are serious efforts being made to make bioethics a national concern. Last December, the Senate passed a bill to create a 2-year National Advisory Commission on Health Science and Society. The commission would be given $2 million to contract out studies and make recommendations on the advisability of creating a permanent national body of some sort. But even this relatively small investment may not be made soon—the bill is now bottled up in the House health subcommittee, chaired by Representative Paul Rogers (D–Fla.), from whence it is unlikely to emerge this year. This means the Senate will have to start over again next year.

An international commission has even darker chances of becoming a reality in the near future. The president of CIOMS, Alfred Gellhorn of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, says outside financial support would have to be found because WHO and Unesco would not want to be associated with a group that would inevitably be grappling with some inflammatory political and social questions.

CIOMS is a nongovernmental organization created in 1949 by grants from WHO and Unesco. Its membership includes 50 or so international medical and scientific societies and 17 national members, such as the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. Its initial charge was to reestablish war-torn communications in the world scientific community; now it has turned its attention to interdisciplinary conferences for the purpose of discussing sensitive topics such as heart transplants and human experimentation.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

the circumstances "looked like hell." Filer's colleague, however, was nevertheless quick to insist that Filer was a man of great integrity who had "never, *never* asked us to color or manipulate data."

As for Olney, the scientist said, "He's a very reputable researcher, although he's getting a bit paranoid about all this. Still, he's right in saying that a lot of people doing nutritional research have a vested interest in the food and drug industries."

George Owen, for his part, readily admits that he received research funds not only from Gerber but from Wyeth Laboratories (also a manufacturer of baby food). He says the grants preceded his appointment to the MSG panel by about a year, but that the work they supported had nothing to do with this particular additive. He too expressed dismay that anyone could think that "Jack Filer was in someone's pocket." He said that while he had been associated with Filer at the University of Iowa, companies like Gerber, Wyeth, and Mead Johnson & Co. had been generous in their support of pediatric research, but the money had always been given and accepted on the understanding that data would be reported factually.

At first, Olney's allegations met with something approaching disbelief by the Senate committee, partly because not all the details of the academy panel's financial connections were immediately available. Senator Percy, for one, observed skeptically that Olney seemed to imply "collusion" between industry and a scientific body that was "beyond reproach."

That was on Tuesday, 19 September. On Wednesday, the committee grew more reproachful as other witnesses tended to corroborate what Olney had said, if only in a general way.

First came Samuel S. Epstein, a professor of environmental health at Case Western Reserve University and an outspoken advocate of stronger controls on food additives, drugs, and pesticides. Epstein contended that "close identification of the NAS-NRC Food Protection Committee with industrial interests makes it singularly inappropriate as a major source of 'independent' advice" to the Food and Drug Administration. He told the hearing that "anyone can buy the data to support his case" and that the academy committee—of which the MSG panel was an ad hoc offshoot—was supported "strongly by the food, chemical, and packaging industries."