

Improving information systems in Europe: EURETHNET

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Abstract

The efforts of the European Commission to create a “European Research Area” in the field of biotechnology are accompanied by a growing demand for an ethical discourse. Cultural differences, however, between the European Union’s member states create a vital need to improve bioethical information structures in Europe so as to foster European bioethics discourses and to cope with diversity and ethical pluralism. Responding to the need for an increased European contribution to the international discussion on ethics in medicine and biotechnology, some of Europe’s leading bioethics institutions have joined forces to establish the international network “EURETHNET”. 18 partners from nine European countries have come together to develop an information network and knowledge base in the field of ethics in medicine and biotechnology. This short communication displays the aims, scope and realisation of the network.

Keywords

Ethics, Medicine, Bioethics, Biotechnology, Database, Literature, Internet, Europe, European Union, Cultural Diversity

The problem

On the 23rd of January 2002, the European Commission (EC) presented the Communication “Life Sciences and Biotechnology - A Strategy for Europe”.¹ The aim of this policy paper is to strengthen the competitiveness of the European biotechnology sector. However, scientific and technological progress in the life sciences confronts European societies with challenges related to human nature, the limits of progress and the interactions between the scientific community and the public. Biotechnological progress in Europe has to be consistent with common fundamental values and ethical principles.

Thus, two questions arise. How can researchers, bioethical professionals, decision makers, consumers and the public quickly gather information about the ethical implications of

research in the life sciences? And furthermore, how can these groups participate in an educated dialogue on “common fundamental values and ethical principles”?

Searching library catalogues and journals for literature on bioethics is something only research professionals usually do. Still they have to cope with a vast number of unscrutinised entries. Therefore, national initiatives have started to set up databases to make literature on bioethics available and easily accessible. In Germany, for example, the German Federal Minister for Education, Science, Research and Technology financed the establishment of a National Reference Centre for Ethics in the Life Sciences (DRZE, Bonn). This includes the creation of a national database network involving the DRZE (<http://www.drze.de>), the Information and Documentation Centre for Ethics in Medicine (IDEM, Goettingen) of the German Academy for Ethics in Medicine (AEM, <http://www.aem-online.de>), and the Interdepartmental Centre for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities (IZEW, Tuebingen) (<http://www.izew.uni-tuebingen.de>).

On a European level, the gathering of information on bioethics is even more complicated. Differences in language, culture and tradition impede an exchange of information and expertise. European societies show an enormous variety of cultural differences based on divergent historical, religious and philosophical backgrounds. This entails different attitudes towards biotechnological progress and different ethical answers to challenges arising from the progress of the life sciences. Existing facilities do not fully answer the needs and demands of European users because they do not implement European literature on a large scale or do not enhance multilingual key words. Thus, national databases do not fulfil the task of supplying information on a European scale. International databases are needed.

Until the end of 2001, BIOETHICSLINE has been a useful tool for European scholars in search for bioethics literature. But in autumn 2001 BIOETHICSLINE was closed down². Although its coverage was worldwide, most records were from English-language sources, i. e. from US-American or English journals and newspapers. European cultural and philosophical diversity was thus not taken into account. However, the specific nature of European consumer needs and the diversity in European answers to bioethical questions require the pooling of European information resources from as many countries as possible. This will foster pluralism in national as well as global bioethics discourses. For achieving the necessary level of heightened understanding across nations and cultures, it is essential that the maximum number of involved and affected persons and professional organisations in Europe be awarded free and easy access to the knowledge resources in the area of ethics in medicine and biotechnology.

The European Commission stated that “*Europe at large is in need of a more systematic information facility on ethical issues in science, providing access, in various languages, to information on legislation, codes of conduct, best practices, and debates taking place in the different European countries.*”³ As a result, in its “Science and Society Action plan”, the Commission announced to support the development of “*an information and documentation observatory ... to help track and analyse the development of ethical issues in science at national and international level.*”⁴

A solution

Responding to the need for an increased European contribution to the international discussion on ethics in medicine and biotechnology, some of Europe’s leading bioethics institutions have joined forces to establish the international network “EURETHNET”. 18 partners from nine European countries (Belgium,⁵ Denmark,⁶ France,⁷ Germany,⁸ Italy,⁹ the Netherlands,¹⁰ Spain,¹¹ Sweden¹² and the United Kingdom¹³) have come together to develop an information network and knowledge base in the field of ethics in medicine and biotechnology. The project is co-ordinated by the Department for Medical Ethics and History of Medicine, University of Goettingen (Prof. C. Wiesemann). The European Commission funds this international initiative in correspondence to its action plan.

The EURETHNET is an information network and knowledge base designed as a virtual unit of different databases constructed along common database structures and a core thesaurus that allow for cross-searching and comparative information research. It will make relevant sources in the field of ethics in biomedicine and biotechnology and related legal sources available to academics, researchers, bioethical professionals, decision-makers and consumers. Existing and forthcoming databases and other information resources on ethics in medicine and biootechnology can be integrated. The single databases of the network from different European countries *are independent and autonomous*, but built within a common framework. The network duly respects national, regional and local preferences and particularities while furthering the development of information products according to European documentary standards. The Network aims to harmonise documentary standards and documentation procedures, *not the content of the information*.

EURETHNET currently consists of three major database networks and an Internet Portal making the databases and other information systems and products easily accessible for different user groups. The European Database Network on Ethics in Medicine

“EUROETHICS” and the European Database Network on Ethics in Biotechnology “ENDEBIT” are incorporated in the integrated European Bioethics Literature Database “EuroBELIT”. Via the Internet Portal the information services of EuroBELIT as well as the databases of other information providers are available. Furthermore, the creation of the European Bioethics Communication and Information System “EuroBECIS” provides information about experts, institutions and research projects related to bioethics. European scope notes will complement the information services offered. The network is set up along common documentary standards so that documentation structures and procedures are harmonised. A core thesaurus will allow for cross-searching as well as comparative research. Task groups formed by different participants of the network are responsible for the realisation and updating of the databases as well as the internet portal. A Steering Committee formed by country representatives of the participating countries develops the core thesaurus, reviews the documentation standards, reassures co-operation with other information providers and guarantees user orientation by regularly evaluating the services offered.

In accordance with the need for a European database on bioethics, EURETHNET substantially improves the research and knowledge infrastructure in Europe. It facilitates the information transfer in the area of ethics in medicine and biotechnology between all research communities, professions, countries, and cultures world-wide. EURETHNET will help to foster increased public awareness for bioethical issues on a European-wide basis in order to fulfil the pressing need for a cross-national and cross-cultural dialogue. The network will provide free online access to exhaustive, valid and reproducible bioethical information and enable comparative thematic research on a European level.

EURETHNET’s services will be available online () for the first time in August 2002. The full benefits of the network and access to its databases will be available in summer 2003. The databases will be enlarged and extended until December 2004, the official end of the project. However, means to carry on the database network will have to be found. Recently, a proposal to extend EURETHNET by seven new members from Central and Eastern Europe (partners coming from Länder aufzählen) was positively evaluated by the European Commission. Nevertheless, to fulfil the Action plan of the European Commission a prolongation of the funding is necessary to keep up the urgently needed services of EURETHNET in Europe.

¹ European Commission: “Life Sciences and Biotechnology - A Strategy for Europe”, COM(2002) 27, 23.01.02

² Luckily, the information it contained will not get lost as it will be integrated into the monographic database LOCATORplus (<http://locatorplus.gov>) and into PubMed (<http://pubmed.gov>).

³ European Commission, “Science and Society Action Plan“ COM(2001) 714, 04.12.2001, p. 21

⁴ ibd. p. 21

⁵ Centre de Recherche Interdisciplinaire en Bioéthique, Bruxelles

International Forum for Biophilosophy, Leuven

⁶ Centre for Ethics and Law in Nature and Society, Copenhagen

⁷ Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale: Centre de documentation en éthique (NSERM, CDEI), Paris

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