

## LETTER FROM KARACHI

### Cricket and bioethics in the air

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As this letter is being written preparations are on for the Indian cricket team's visit. Karachi in particular and Pakistan in general is enjoying the new-found peace and goodwill with India. Still, there have been two attempts reported on the president's life and a major military operation is on in the North Western Frontier Province.

Despite such trying times bioethics has moved up a notch in Pakistan. February saw the setting up of a National Bioethics Commission. One of its mandates is to formulate national ethical guidelines for research. The main movers are the Ministry of Health, the Ministry for Science and technology and the Pakistan Medical Research Council. The last is organizing a two-day workshop on Research Bioethics in March to educate members of the National Bioethics Commission on various ethical issues in health research.

The largest dermatological institute in Pakistan, the Institute of Skin Disease, Karachi, Sindh had a guest lecture introducing the subject of bioethics. Dow Medical College, a premier medical college in Pakistan, had as its theme 'Ethical research for development' for its annual symposium. This symposium had two plenary sessions on medical ethics and on ethical issues in health research in developing countries.

Finally, more than 500 participants attended a three-day conference on 'Health Asia' in Karachi, which had a half-day session on ethics. The session discussed issues in research and the involvement of the pharmaceutical industry and physicians. Some multinational pharmaceutical companies are willing to pay monthly instalments to doctors on such items as cars, air-conditioners, deep-freezers, etc. if the doctors make the one-third down payment. Another topic was the ethics of medical

journalism: at least two medical newspapers reported on a conference that unfortunately was cancelled at the last moment because of a local law and order situation. In other words, the report was based on advance reports and not after attending the meeting itself.

Despite the growing prominence given to bioethics, many issues remain unresolved. News of the Mumbai doctor's arrest for involvement in illegal renal transplantations reached here. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, there is no specific law prohibiting live unrelated renal transplantation. So a lucrative market has developed in Rawalpindi and Lahore, with as many as 12–15 paid transplants occurring in a week. This market is also utilised by patients from rich Arab countries who represent about 50% of transplant recipients here.

A law on cadaver donation has been in the Senate for the past 15 years, but unfortunately successive governments have not tabled it. As long as there are no cadaveric transplants, the organ bazaars of Pakistan will continue to flourish.

The bioethics group at the Aga Khan University has invited Dr Abdulaziz Sachedina, Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia for a two-day discourse on Islamic Bioethics. The members of the Bioethics Group and the Ethics Review Committee will have in-depth discussions on 'Islamic bioethics: a search for methodology and ethics, law and society: the sources of moral reasoning in Islam'. Dr Sachedina will also give two talks to a larger university audience on 'Cross-cultural dimensions of bioethics: the case of human cloning' and 'Islam and democracy: religion and the New World Order'.