



Growing Acceptance for Advisory Councils on Ethics

- **The voice of ethics advisory councils is increasingly being heard by policy makers**
- **Scientific and ethics competence of ethics council members is crucial**
- **Consideration of ethical issues can drive scientific progress**

Advisory councils on the ethics of medical and scientific developments are becoming increasingly important in European countries. Advisory councils were frequently viewed as potential opponents to progress by industry and officials just a few years ago, but today this relationship is becoming increasingly collaborative. That is the tenor of the panel discussions at the European Health Forum Gastein 2008 (EHFG) taking place from 1 to 4 October in Bad Hofgastein. The ethical aspects of medical developments are a core issue at the 11th edition of the most important health policy event in the EU in which 620 leading experts from health administration, health policy, medicine, science and NGOs are taking part.

“Naturally we are unable to implement even close to 100 percent of our ideas,” says Professor Albert Weale, chairman of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the UK-based bioethics advisory group. “But our voice is being heard and often we see that policy decisions in the UK on issues related to biology and medicine coincide with the Council’s advice.” For example, in one of its earliest reports the Council made a number of recommendations to improve the implementation of genetic screening programmes in the UK, which have since come to fruition.

According to Professor Weale, the scientific and ethics competence of advisory councils is crucial in order for them to have influence. “Formal regulations requiring the inclusion of ethics councils in decision-making processes can be a good approach, but to be effective they must ultimately be convincing. This can only succeed if the personalities represented on the councils enjoy the necessary expertise.” Broad competence in the natural sciences, physicians, ethics specialists, sociologists and legal specialists are indispensable for this.

Professor Weale is encouraged that industry and the authorities now view ethics councils as a potential partner rather than an “unavoidable evil”. “No ethics council intends to hamper or impede scientific and technological progress. But we want to ensure any such progress has been considered carefully in terms of its social and ethical implications. This is in fact essential for ensuring that research and innovation do not encounter public resistance, and in this regard we believe that ethical review can be a driver, rather than a hinderer, of scientific advance.”

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