Remarks on medical ethics

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Two important and moving papers describing the situation of medical and paramedical professionals in South Africa and Argentina are presented in this collection of papers from our symposium. Both distinguished authors also mention the complicated situation of the most important subject, the patient. A fascinating presentation has been given by our colleague from the USSR. We are compelled to think about the strong influence of political, economic and social conditions on human rights. We must think about the importance of medical ethics for everyday medicine. The system of apartheid in South Africa, which is based on racial intolerance, has undoubtedly many specific features. However, from our Central European observer's point of view, some common key characteristics stand out. Czechoslovakia – like Poland and Hungary – started to get rid of the burden of another sort of apartheid in 1989. Ours was based on class-struggle ideology, social intolerance and, last but not least, on misrepresented ideas of social equality and social fairness – both totally twisted.

Fulfilling the universal code of medical ethics is the '*conditio sine qua non*' and we should prevent all attempts to change the basic document of European and world medicine, the Hippocratic Oath. Pross's paper about the total failure of the German Medical Association to acknowledge and deal with war crimes perpetrated by doctors reinforces the need to adhere to the Hippocratic Oath.

All possible protective mechanisms should be used to prevent the participation of medical and paramedical staff in inhuman activities such as torturing and the abuse of medical science and drugs. The disastrous effects of changes in medical ethics induced by ideology have been repeatedly described and documented.

A great Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka, inspired Václav Havel to follow his ideas of living in truth. To achieve this ideal state one needs objective information. Access to all, even tabooed, information was vitally important for members of the dissent movement in Central and Eastern Europe. Human and professional contacts played an important role in breaking psychological and political barriers dividing 'our' Europe from the 'other' Europe. We all were

isolated and separated – you, in your free democratic Europe and we behind the Iron (and mental) Curtain.

The exchange of objective and critical information about violating human rights and medical codes, provided mostly by the Western mass media, was a very important factor. It helped victims of political suppression to learn how to protect themselves.

Analysis of different torture methods seems to show that in Central and Eastern Europe there were some special mechanisms of 'collective mass' torture. As a neurologist I am fascinated by the enigma of the various origins of pain and the different methods of treatment. As a psychotherapist I can admit, and stress, that our nations suffered also from a political related pain. Indoctrination, manipulation of ideas and various mechanisms of social pressure are some of the dangerous and sophisticated methods of torture to which we were exposed.

Our society and other Central and Eastern European nations will need many years to accomplish mental and social rehabilitation. We feel we should discuss problems connected with various aspects of torture and its prevention. Physical torture represents only one aspect of this complex and painful problem.

We hope that our colleagues from South Africa and Argentina understand our problems and can find some inspiration there, just as we find understanding and inspiration in their papers. The open discussion focussed on all these questions, the wide professional and personal contacts – both at governmental and non-governmental level – are immensely important. We do not believe global sanctions can be effective if we are isolated from each other. It is necessary to combine different kinds of sanctions with contacts and with providing proper information.

Let us take the publication of this collection of our papers from the symposium as a promise of a better future for our South African colleagues; let us hope that all forms of apartheid and dictatorship will disappear and that torture will be prevented by medical and paramedical professionals standing together to take world-wide, united action.

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