

## Book

### Medical research in developing countries and western mores

In richer countries, in which the rapid pace of development in medical research and biotechnology is constantly raising new ethical questions, it is easy to forget the infinitely more complex issues that face scientists or companies who wish to work in the developing world. But as western governments and international agencies direct more of their financial support towards research and development in poorer countries, these difficult questions will have to be faced.

The problems are formidable. Although a few centres in developed countries have created committees for the express purpose of monitoring work of this kind, the bulk of their ethics committees do not have the knowledge or experience to be able to deal adequately with the complexities of work in developing countries, which often have limited facilities of this type. Against this background, even informed consent—the gold standard of the ethical basis of medical research in the west—becomes a complex issue. Language difficulties, educational limitations, completely different concepts of the nature of disease, and many other factors combine to make it difficult for an adult to be genuinely informed about the nature of a clinical trial or a potentially invasive procedure, whether it involves themselves or their children. Consent given by others on their behalf is equally unsatisfactory. While these problems have been widely debated, no clear solutions have emerged; some bioethicists have even suggested that the western mores of informed consent may not be applicable in developing countries.

Examples of equally challenging questions have been raised more recently by research on the application of control measures for genetic disease in poorer countries. Here, western norms seem even more inadequate.

Again, the very nature of disease processes and limited education pose a major problem. How, for example, is it possible to convey the nature of recessive inheritance in a highly patriarchal society where women are inevitably blamed for the production of an infant with a serious disease? Is it ethical to try to change such long-ingrained social customs as

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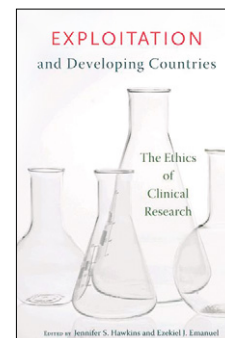
arranged marriages, with their high level of consanguinity and increased risk of recessive disease? And to what extent should efforts directed at the control of disease be encouraged in situations in which they are not compatible with local religious beliefs? I recently discussed the acceptability of termination of pregnancy for serious genetic disease with the Dalai Lama. He answered that the taking of any form of life is not acceptable to the Buddhist philosophy, but added that Buddhism is also very flexible—a view that seems completely compatible with the widely varying attitudes to this issue among different Buddhist populations.

The issue of research in developing countries came to a head in the mid-1990s. By then it was clear that a relatively long and expensive course of an antiviral agent could have a major role in preventing maternal-fetal HIV transmission, but that this regimen was far too expensive for use in poorer countries. The US National Institutes of Health (NIH), therefore, encouraged a series of randomised controlled trials of shorter and simpler regimens of this drug compared with placebo controls. To some this violated the standard principle that a placebo-controlled trial

is not ethical when at least one agent has already been shown to be effective for treating the disease in question. There was widespread criticism and condemnation of these trials, especially with regard to whether the research participants were being exploited.

In 2002, the Department of Clinical Bioethics at NIH convened a seminar series on exploitation and its relation to research practice in developing countries. This book, based on these seminars, focuses on two cases for its investigation of exploitation: a controlled trial of a hepatitis A vaccine in Thailand, in which there appeared to be no chance that the agent would be available to the country if it were shown to be effective; and a proposed placebo-controlled trial in South America of a new surfactant for respiratory distress syndrome in premature infants at a time when several other surfactants had been shown to be effective. After a useful primer on the overall problems of research ethics in developing countries and the concept of exploitation, subsequent essays deal with various aspects of these trials and try to define what is meant by exploitation in these settings. Although the philosophical sections relating to Marxist and non-Marxist conceptions of exploitation are rather dense, readers new to the field will be left in no doubt about the extraordinary complexities of defining what is meant by “exploitation” in the rapidly changing setting of research in a developing country.

One essay by Thomas Pogge takes a broader view of this issue, citing the neglect of developing countries by many pharmaceutical companies and governments of the developed countries. If it had been possible for the Thai Government to provide the hepatitis A vaccine to its population, had it proved to be efficacious, the



**Exploitation and Developing Countries: the Ethics of Clinical Research**  
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question of exploitation would not have arisen. Although there have been attempts to improve this situation, none have been entirely satisfactory. The 1994 Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) went some way to tackle the patents problem, and various differential pricing and public/private schemes have been explored. However, as pointed out by Pogge, much more imaginative solutions are needed to solve this problem, a process that will require more collaboration within the pharmaceutical industry and its better interaction with the governments of rich and poor countries.

A vital issue that is not discussed in this book is the importance of the way in which research in developing countries is organised. At worst, this may simply amount to a short visit by scientists or pharmaceutical companies directed entirely to their own ends

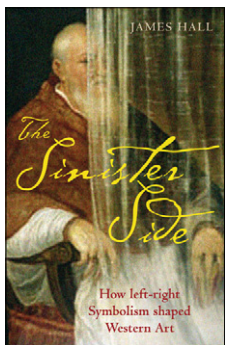
and without much thought about the risks and benefits of the research for the local community. There are several examples of projects of this kind, particularly involving companies that wished to obtain particular crops for genetic manipulation or DNA from populations with unusually high frequencies of particular diseases for drug development. Such approaches, which have received the emotive label “biopiracy”, are unacceptable. A much more humane way forward is the establishment of partnerships between developed and developing countries which, if sustained, can lead to vital capacity building as well as productive research of value to both parties.

There are already examples of the effectiveness of North/South partnerships, the concept of which has been approved by WHO and other international agencies and funding bodies. In the long term, this is surely

the best approach to evolving a more rational basis for defining the ethical issues involved in research in the developing countries. Provided they are long-sustained and genuine partnerships, the mutual trust and understanding that follows provides an environment in which these complex problems can be solved in the light of the widely differing social and religious backgrounds of individual societies.

It is clear from these essays that the mores of western bioethics are often inadequate or ill-defined to meet the research needs of developing countries; without closer long-term interaction of this kind, leading to mutual understanding between rich and poor countries, it will be difficult to make further progress in this critically important field.

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**The Sinister Side:**  
How Left-Right Symbolism  
Shaped Western Art  
James Hall. Oxford University  
Press, 2008. Pp 489. £16.99.  
ISBN 978-1-19-923086-0.

## In brief

### Book Left-right symbolism

One of the last photographs of Gandhi before he was assassinated is by Henri Cartier-Bresson. The seated Mahatma is seen from behind, the right side of his body is in shadow, the left in bright sunshine. He holds his left palm up, fingers splayed. Would this image be as memorable if it showed his right hand? Perhaps not. Certainly not, the art critic and historian James Hall maintains in *The Sinister Side*, in which he goes to great lengths to show how western art has persuaded us to interpret the body's left and right sides differently.

Hall discusses Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, in which God extends his right hand towards the left hand of Adam. In Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, she smiles on the left side, but not the right, and also turns to her left. In Velázquez's *Christ on the Cross*, Christ's head falls to his

right; in Christian art generally the saved are always to Christ's right. In Picasso's Blue Period *La Vie*, the young man of genius wards off his lover by gesturing with his left hand at a woman cradling a child.

Such left-right complexity has been neglected in recent academic mapping of the body. Chris McManus's *Right Hand, Left Hand* (2002), is an exception, to which Hall pays frank tribute. His own book in a sense aims to do for art what McManus did for science and society. But he thinks that McManus goes too far in asserting that in all continents, periods, and cultures, “always it is right that is good and left that is bad”. Hall comments: “One aim of my book is to show the variety of left-right distinctions in western culture, and how these are far from being universally hostile to the left.”

Titian's two versions of *Portrait of Cardinal Archinto* are particularly fascinating. One is conventional; the other renders ghostly the left side of the cardinal's body with a vertical curtain, diaphanous and rippling. It is as if Archinto's “sinister” side is being repudiated, and only his “spiritual” right side is left intact, says Hall. Fair enough, but can one compare the pulling across of the curtain—apparently with the cardinal's right hand—to the left-to-right movement in making the sign of the Cross?

For all its evident erudition, unpretentious prose, and thought-provoking ideas, *The Sinister Side* is in parts fanciful and confused. I recommend keeping a small mirror to hand when studying the many helpful illustrations.

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