

# The First Decade of Development of Bioethics in Slovakia (1990-2000)

## SLOVAKYA'DA BİYOETİK'İN GELİŞİMİNİN İLK ON YILI

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### Summary

Bioethics developed in Slovakia after 1989. In the field of medicine and health care, this was marked by a remarkable interest in the old and novel ethical problems, brought in by the new developments in medicine, biology and other life sciences, as well as by new problems emerging within the health care system reforms. Some bioethical congresses were held in Slovakia. Central Ethics Committee was founded in 1990. In some universities, the departments of medical ethics were opened. In this article, these developments have been reported.

**Key Words:** Bioethics, Health care,  
Central ethics committee

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### Özet

Biyotik, Slovakia'da 1989'dan sonra gelişti. Tıp ve sağlık bakımı alanında bu durum, hem tıp, biyoloji ve diğer sağlık bilimlerinde yeni gelişmelerle ortaya çıkan eski ve yeni etik problemler, hem de sağlık bakımı sistemi reformlarında acilen beliren yeni problemlerle ortaya çıktı. Bazı biyoetik kongreleri yapıldı. Merkezi Etik Komitesi 1990'da kuruldu. Bazı üniversitelerde tıp etiği kürsüleri açıldı. Bu çalışmada bu gelişmelerden bahsedilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Biyoetik, Sağlık bakımı,  
Merkezi etik komitesi

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Bioethics in Slovakia was born after the so-called 'Velvet Revolution' of November 1989. The fall of a totalitarian communist regime with its totalitarian ideology and despotism of Marxism-Leninism in the science and culture, opened the door for a new freedom and exciting possibilities of progress and development. The need of a profound renewal and reform of the economical, social, cultural, and scientific life of the country was felt as an indispensable prerequisite of a prosperous, free and democratic rise of the society.

In the field of medicine and health care this was marked by a remarkable interest in the old and novel ethical problems, brought in by the new developments in medicine, biology and other life sciences, as well as by new problems emerging within the health care system reforms. Moreover, the situation of the health care system in Slovakia was experienced by many as one of the hallmarks of inadequacy of the previous regime and the need for deep, conceptual reform was paramount.

### 1. The Roots for the Start

The workers entering the field of bioethics in Slovakia at its beginning could be divided into different groups according to their, ideological, background:

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1. People coming from the circles of the **INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE** against previous Marxist-Leninist ideological monopoly. They were dissenting intellectuals engaged in the former “underground”, physicians of various specialties, nurses, theologians or philosophers from the underground structures of churches, the university educated people of different professions that had survived intellectually and spiritually in privacy. They were keen to enter enthusiastically to the public debate, or scientific, educational and publishing work in a newly experienced freedom.

2. **UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN HUMANITIES**, whose were educated and trained in abundance during the previous period, trying to transform themselves quickly from Marxists-Leninists to the “Democrats”, “Liberals”, or “Christians”.

3. Small in number, but rather influential because of a considerable intellectual and/or financial support from abroad were the **PROponents OF THE NEW** “ultramodern” views and ideologies, or, on the other hand, of the “ultra-conservative” and pseudo-religious views and teachings.

Thus, the field of bioethics has been very pluralistic in character from the very beginning of its existence in Slovakia, though Christian, “democratic”, “humanistic”, and “(neo)conservative” views and tendencies prevailed.

## **2. Bioethics and the Reform of the Health Care**

-The efforts of reforming and humanizing the medicine and health care received a strong momentum after a new, democratic government, based on a broad coalition of democratic powers in the country, was established (1990).

-Among the priorities of the Slovak Ministry of Health (MH), while dealing with the acute problems of functioning of the health care system (HCS) under difficult conditions of the transition period, there was the preparation of a profound HCS reform (the transition from the state-owned, planned “socialist” HCS towards a more decentralized one, with a considerable proportion of the private sector). Special attention and interest of MH was paid to the ethical aspects of the reform meas-

ures and concepts proposed (including the new health legislation), which eventually led to the creation of the **CENTRAL ETHICS COMMITTEE** of MH (1990). This, national ethics committee’ was among the first created in the former socialist countries of Central Eastern Europe.

-The Committee took on an active role in promoting and developing an ethical reflection, ethical review (e.g. of the new health legislation, the health research projects funded by the state, etc.), as well as development and step-by-step “institutionalisation” of medical ethics (bioethics) within the health care system in Slovakia. Slovak delegates became active in various international bodies and initiatives concerned with ethical problems of medicine and other life sciences.

## **3. Important Developments in the Years 1990-2000**

-**CENTRAL ETHICS COMMITTEE**, Ministry of Health, Bratislava, Autumn 1990 (start of the conceptual and organizational work in bioethics).

-**INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON HUMANISM IN THE MODERN MEDICAL CARE**, Bratislava, April 1991 (2500 participants, sponsored by the Ministry of Health, might be considered as an “inaugural” congress of bio-ethics as a new discipline in Slovakia).

-**EAST-WEST BIOETHICS CONFERENCE**, Prague, August 1991 (started the collaboration with The Hastings Center (USA)).

-**CHAIR OF MEDICAL ETHICS** at the Postgraduate Medical School (PMS), September 1991, Bratislava (beginning of regular postgraduate education in medical ethics (bioethics) of health care professionals in Slovakia).

-**REGIONAL CZECHO-SLOVAKIA-HUNGARY-POLAND SYMPOSIUM ON CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN MEDICAL ETHICS**, Bratislava, January 3-4, 1992 (co-sponsored by the Council of Europe).

-**INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE COURSE ON CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN MEDICAL ETHICS**, Bratislava, January 3-4, 1992 (the first international course organized by the Chair of Medical Ethics).

-INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL ETHICS& BIOETHICS (IMEB), March 30, 1992, Bratislava, founded on the basis of the Chair of Medical Ethics PMS as a joint institute of PMS and Faculty of Medicine (coordination of under&postgraduate education in medical ethics (bioethics) of the health care professionals in Slovakia (students of medicine, nurses, physicians and other health care professionals).

-WORLD PRO-LIFE CONGRESS, Bratislava, May 1992 (2300 participants about 400 from abroad, co-sponsored by the Ministry of Health).

-INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON MEDICAL ETHICS, Bratislava, May 1992, organized by IMEB (600 participants).

-NATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT AND WORK OF ETHICS COMMITTEES-Ministry of Health (ethical committees in hospitals and research institutes) (June 1992).

-MEDICAL ETHICS REGULAR DISCIPLINE AT THE MEDICAL FACULTY, COMENIUS UNIVERSITY, Bratislava (regular lectures&seminars: 1st and 4th year of study).

-INTERNATIONAL COURSE ON MEDICAL ETHICS, IMEB, Bratislava, July 1992 (participants from Ucraina, Russia).

-REGULAR LECTURES ON MEDICAL ETHICS FOR STUDENTS AT THE MEDICAL FACULTY IN KOSICE (Christian Academy of the Safarik's University, Kosice).

-INTERNATIONAL COURSE ON MEDICAL ETHICS, IMEB, Bratislava, June 1993.

-IMEB-member of the European Network of Research and Teaching Centres of Bioethics sponsored by the Council of Europe (1993).

-Publishing of the book "Contemporary Problems of Medical Ethics in Central Europe" (ed.J.Glasa), IMEB-Charis, Bratislava, 1993, p.128 (first international book in bioethics published in Slovakia).

-EUROPEAN COUNCIL CONFERENCE ON TEACHING OF BIOETHICS IN EUROPE, IMEB, Bratislava, November 23-25, 1993.

-Start of the participation of IMEB in the international project of The Hastings Center (N.Y., USA) "GOALS OF MEDICINE".

-Starting of the journal of IMEB- "MEDICAL ETHICS&BIOETHICS" (4 issues/year, English/Slovak, International).

-First texts on medical ethics for students in Slovak language -"SELECTED CHAPTERS OF MEDICAL ETHICS" (L.Soltés et al.), Medical Faculty of Comenius University, Bratislava, 1994, p.106.

-Proposal of the new statutes of Central Ethics Committee of the Ministry of Health SR (August 1994).

-INTERNATIONAL COURSE ON MEDICAL ETHICS- "Ethics of Family Health and Care", IMEB, Bratislava, September 2-4, 1994.

-Participation of Slovak bioethicsts in the Governmental Delegation to the UNO INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT, Cairo, Egypt, September 1994.

-INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE "PATIENTS AND CARERS", October 6-7, 1995, IMEB in collaboration with the International Association of Law, Ethics and Science (Paris) and the Council of Europe (Strasbourg).

-Beginning of regular lectures in bioethics organized in collaboration with IMEB for the students of law at the Faculty of Law, Comenius University, Bratislava (1995).

-NEW INSTITUTIONS started the work in bioethics (e.g. the programmes of the Faculty of Nursing of the Trnava University; Institute of Nursing at the Faculty of Medicine of the Comenius University in Martin, etc.), leading, conceptual and developmental role played by IMEB.

-SLOVAK CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS created a special advisory committee-COMMISSION ON BIOETHICAL ISSUES (Spring 1995).

-Slovak bioethicsts active in the preparatory work and in the governmental delegation to the UN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN (Beijing, August 1995).

-WORKING GROUP ON PATIENTS' RIGHTS of the Association of Hospitals (since 1995) (the international documents published in Slovak language, proposal of national charter elaborated).

-1st BRATISLAVA DAY OF NURSING ETHICS (held in collaboration of IMEB and School of Nursing of Dr.I. Hálek in Bratislava (April 1996).

-INTERNATIONAL COURSE AND CONFERENCE OF BIOETHICS- "Health Care under Stress: Maintaining Integrity in Time of Scarcity", Bratislava (August 1996).

-2nd BRATISLAVA DAY OF NURSING ETHICS (March 1997).

-6th INTERNATIONAL COURSE AND CONFERENCE OF BIOETHICS "Hospices: Status Quo and Perspectives", IMEB, Bratislava (Sept. 1997).

-The first TEXTBOOK OF NURSING ETHICS in Slovak (April 1998).

-3rd BRATISLAVA DAY OF NURSING ETHICS, Bratislava (April 1998).

-INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP "Ethics of Research and Environment", Bratislava, April 1998, Institute of Preventive and Clinical Medicine in collaboration with IMEB and Institute for Rural Health, University of Iowa (USA).

-INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE "Ethics of Research in Medicine, Status of Human Embryo", Bratislava-Modra, October 1998, IMEB and MH, cosponsored by the Council of Europe.

-TEXTS ON MEDICAL ETHICS, BIOETHICS, PASTORAL MEDICINE published at different Slovak Universities (1997-2000).

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion it could be observed, that medical ethics and bioethics in Slovakia has made a considerable progress in quite a short period of

time (about one decade). It started as a voluntary based informal movement or activities of self-educated enthusiasts coming mostly from the intellectual dissent or resistance against previous totalitarian regime. However, it has been able to constitute itself as a modern, practice, oriented, multidisciplinary scientific discipline, whose voice is still more clearly heard in the relevant national and international fields (medicine, health care, bio-medical and life-sciences research, legislation initiatives, professional and general public debates).

It is strongly hoped, that bioethics shall develop and grow further in Slovakia, successfully preserving her nice and healthy dialogical, slightly conservative and open-minded character.

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