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Focus on infectious disease

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In 2002, the *Economist* argued that though ethical issues arising in the context of neuroscience rival or surpass, in importance, those arising in the context of genetics, bioethics discussion has largely neglected the former in comparison with the latter (*Economist* 2002). The limited scope of bioethics' gaze, to date, is similarly revealed by its relative neglect of the topic infectious disease. The articles of this focus section thus address a general area where we should hope and expect to see more discussion.

Written by leaders in the field, topics covered here include vaccination policy, bioterrorism, and physicians' duties to treat patients with contagious diseases. These will all be major topics of emerging discourse surrounding ethics and infectious disease. While the issue of physicians' "duty to treat" is one that, admittedly, has already received substantial discussion in bioethics literature, most previous debate focused on AIDS in particular, and SARS revealed that this topic must be revisited (for additional recent discussion on health workers' duty to treat, see Huber and Wynia 2004; Reid 2005). Discussion around vaccination policy has, in the meanwhile, been gradually growing in recent years; and bioterrorism, of course, is a sign of the times.

Other relevant issues worthy of further discourse, to name just a few, include drug resistance, stigmatization of and discrimination against infected groups or individuals, developing world countries' access to medicines—and public health policy measures such as surveillance and quarantine. Though the ethical issues raised by infectious diseases will sometimes overlap with those discussed in other areas of bioethics, the phenomenon of contagion, the panic sparked by epidemics, the fact that infectious diseases primarily affect the poor, and the fact that the historical and likely future consequences of infectious diseases are

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almost unrivalled, together justify recognition of infectious disease as an ethical area of special importance (Selgelid 2005; Smith et. al 2004).

Though it was previously believed that infectious diseases would be eliminated through medical progress, this has obviously not come to pass. HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria together kill six million people each year; and infectious diseases in general kill approximately 15 million people annually. Numerous “emerging diseases”—including AIDS, Ebola, SARS, and others—have newly appeared in recent decades; and it is only a matter of time before we are faced with a major flu pandemic or the next bioterrorist attack. More attention should be drawn to the ethical, legal, and social issues associated with the infectious disease status quo and predictable eventualities. In many ways the previous neglect of infectious disease, in comparison with traditional bioethics topics such as abortion and euthanasia, is striking (Selgelid 2005; Francis et al. 2005). While malaria kills over one million people (the vast majority of which are impoverished) each year, for example, I have never seen an article in mainstream bioethics literature dedicated to the ethical issues associated with this disease. We should look forward to seeing such articles in the future.

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