

Health Law and Ethics

Global Disparities in Health and Human Rights: A Critical Commentary

ABSTRACT

Widening disparities in health and human rights at a global level represent the dark side of progress associated with escalation of economic and military exploitation and exponential population growth in the 20th century. Even the most basic universal human rights cannot be achieved for all under these circumstances. The goal of improved population health will be similarly elusive while medical care is commodified and exploited for commercial gain in the marketplace. Recognition of the powerful forces that polarize our world and commitment to reversing them are essential for the achievement of human rights for all, for the improvement of public health, and for the peaceful progress required to protect the "rational self-interest" of the most privileged people on earth against the escalation of war, disease, and other destructive forces arising from widespread poverty and ecological degradation. (*Am J Public Health*. 1998;88:295-300)

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Introduction

Global challenges at the millennium's end call for deep introspection by the people of the nations that have been most privileged to benefit from scientific and economic progress and for reevaluation of the costs of such progress for those less fortunate. In this regard, we should consider how progress is linked to exploitation of people and nature and how it contributes to the widening national and global disparities (in health, wealth, and human rights) that now jeopardize human health and survival. Such threats to billions of marginalized people can be addressed only through a long-term perspective acknowledging that the self-interest of wealthy and powerful nations will be optimized through the pursuit of policies that foster all human well-being. Failure to respond to such global challenges can only lead to greater poverty and deprivation, continuing conflict, escalating migration of "asylum seekers" from poor to rich countries, and the spread of new and recrudescing infectious diseases (for example, drug-resistant tuberculosis) and ecologic damage that will harm all nations individually and the world collectively.

Consider, for example, that in the 1960s the richest quintile of the world's population was 30 times richer than the poorest 20% and that this gap had increased to over 60 times by the 1990s. An analogy can be drawn between this global scenario and the problems faced in delivering health care, sustaining medical professionalism, and improving public health. Here the challenge is to find ways of providing greater equity in access to health care for individuals within constrained budgets and the means for improving population health within nations and globally. If the annual per capita expenditure of \$3500 on health care in the United States (10 times the total annual per capita gross national product

[GNP] of half the world's population) is not enough to ensure access to a decent level of health care for all US citizens, we must ask what implications this has for US citizens and for the structure of health care systems and health care delivery in poor countries.

I should like to offer here a synoptic (and therefore necessarily incomplete) perspective on such complex global problems. My hope is that a perspective that acknowledges the complex roots of global disparities while seeking resolutely to ensure more widespread realization of human rights can refocus attention on these issues and lead to more open scholarly debate and new commitments to finding solutions that may influence the future. Imaginative, global thinking and visionary actions specific for particular societies are the seeds for initiating and propagating qualitative and quantitative changes that could have major long-term advantages for humankind.

Man's Exploitation of Man and the Creation of Two Worlds

The Western world view has been shaped over centuries through the power of the scientific method, analytical philosophy, industrialization, urbanization, democratization, liberalism, and capitalism. The modern perspective emphasizes capitalism, the pursuit of rational economic self-interest, and the nation-state framework of international relations.^{1,2} These scientific, industrial, and economic developments, much cherished in the Western world, have eman-

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cipated human life and fostered unprecedented human progress. However, the application of a somewhat libertarian version of liberal political philosophy,³ with overemphasis on economic thinking (and underemphasis on social and economic rights), has also been associated with erosion of spirituality, loss of a sense of community, and division of the world (and many countries) into a small, rich core and a large, poor periphery.⁴ Growing polarization between these worlds as they drift apart threatens the future of both wealthy and poor countries. The failure of socialism, as implemented under communist rule in the Soviet Union, has seemingly vindicated the "capitalist" world view. However, celebration is premature, because the crisis of liberal internationalism must now be faced, particularly in regard to the competing elements of the liberal agenda—human rights and the expansion of free trade.² While the liberal vision has been effectively focused on limiting excessive and arbitrary state power, it has neglected the other great enemy in today's world: violence among the poor and dispossessed and the disintegration of power leading to millions of refugees fleeing poverty and disaster.^{2,5}

Human domination and subordination of others in the understandable (perhaps inevitable) pursuit of self-interest has long been clearly evident. However, more recently the scientific credibility given to a form of rationality based on economics that has fostered the growth of powerful and unaccountable multinational corporations has led to the evolution of less obvious exploitative behavior. It is less widely appreciated how these more sophisticated and more covert means of achieving short-term economic self-interest cast a shadow over a broader moral conception of life.¹⁻¹³

Fortunately, our consciences can be reawakened through critical thinking and social activism. For example, a 50-year program against slavery ultimately led to its delegitimation; the implications of destructive uses of nuclear power are increasingly being counteracted through endeavors to delegitimize nuclear testing and prevent the further development of weapons of mass destruction; the degradation of human dignity inflicted through colonial imperialism in Africa (and elsewhere) is being more widely appreciated; there is a deeper understanding that nazism in Germany reflected submission to authority and that such submission to authority also occurs with different implications in other countries; and the adverse effects of neocolonialism resulting from the collusion of superpowers with despotic leaders in developing countries are

being exposed. Lessons learned from these adverse experiences increase awareness of the need for attention to a conception of human rights that goes beyond civil and political rights.

The International Bill of Human Rights (which includes the United Nations Charter [1945], the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [1948], and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [1976], with its optional protocol) was a global expression of the rejection of human domination and exploitation of fellow humans, a dedication to the need for respecting individual human dignity, and an attempt to foster this through development of international law. Nations that refused to identify with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (for example, the Soviet Union and South Africa) and placed what they perceived to be their own self-interest above high aspirations delayed their own progress toward peaceful democracies. The failures of socialism under communist rule and of apartheid provide powerful messages in favor of valuing human dignity and human rights. But less obvious human exploitation persisted and grew within and between even those nations that aspired to be the international guardians of human rights. Sophisticated forms of exploitation, propagated through cultural imperialism, militarism, and devastating wars intimately linked to economic power struggles that shaped a globalized economy, inexorably widened the gap between rich and poor peoples and nations and prevented the widespread access to education, employment, and other opportunities required to foster the realization of human rights.

A brief overview of some demographic data and of wasted resources on armed conflict will vividly portray the consequent predicament of the world's poor. In the 1990s, 77% of the world's population lives in developing countries. The 85%:15% distribution of global GNP between industrialized and developing nations reflects respective average annual per capita GNPs of \$12 510 and \$710¹⁰ (Table 1). In 1986, 50% of the world's rapidly growing population lived in countries where the annual per capita GNP was less than \$270.¹⁰ Poverty is increasing in most parts of the world, and this is a major factor preventing sustainable control of population growth, which in turn threatens physical and mental health as the prerequisites for a decent human life and global survival.

In addition, modern international economic policies have resulted in the extraction of vast quantities of material and human resources from poor developing countries to

rich industrialized nations.^{1,4,9-15} Total developing country world debt in 1990 was \$1.3 trillion (double the level in 1980), and it had grown further to \$1.9 trillion by 1995.¹ The net transfer of resources from developing to industrialized nations between 1983 and 1989 was \$241 billion¹⁰: "a kind of colonial tribute extracted by the rich nations from the poorest people on earth"¹¹ to service the industrial world's deficits and growth rates.¹⁰ Thus, "the debt burden is a scandal which in numerical terms makes the international slave trade of the nineteenth century look like a petty crime."¹⁵ Trade protectionism in industrialized countries costs developing countries a further \$150 billion annually in lost export earnings.¹⁰ Finally, the losses incurred through the "brain drain" are incalculable.

The world spends almost \$1 trillion a year (according to 1990 figures) on military goods and services.^{12,16} About 20% of the world's 2.5 million research scientists and engineers (50% of physicists and engineering scientists) work entirely on military research and development.¹⁷ Approximately \$340 billion worth of military arms were sold or given to developing countries between 1981 and 1988, most of which were produced by the Soviet Union or the United States.¹² The value of arms produced in developing countries (under the influence of superpowers' expansion of their military industrial complex) increased 500-fold between 1950 and 1980 (from \$2 million to \$1.1 billion).¹² Such militarization and the associated militarism have compromised the health of individuals and nations through many mechanisms: killing, maiming, torture, refugeeism, destruction of livelihoods, diversion of resources, crime, terrorism, black markets, poverty, starvation, environmental damage, and destabilization within developing countries.

Industrialized countries spend an average 5.4% of GNP on the military and only 0.3% on aid to developing countries. The Nordic countries admirably contribute 0.9% of their GNP to developing countries, most for social development, whereas the United States focuses most of the 0.15% of its GNP it donates on defense support for Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Pakistan, and the Philippines.¹⁰ In 1990, British aid fell by two thirds of its 1979 value to the lowest ever, 0.27% of GNP.¹⁵

Despite Henry Kissinger's statement at the World Food Conference in 1974—"The profound comment of our era is that for the first time we may have the technical capacity to free mankind from the scourge of hunger"—up to 1 million people died in the Ethiopian famine,¹⁸ the specter of Somalia

TABLE 1—Disparities between “Worlds Drifting Apart.” (Data for 1988 from Human Development Report 1991¹⁰)

	Industrialized World	Developing World
Population % total	23	77
Global GNP %	85	15
GNP per capita	\$12 510 (USA \$19 840)	\$710
Population growth rate %	0.8	2.3
Population poor	0.3 billion	1.2 billion
Maternal mortality: 100 000	24	290
Life expectancy yr	74.5	62.8
Under 5 mortality: 1000	18	116
Annual urban population growth rate 1960–1990	1.4	4.0
Population below poverty line %	2%	32%
Share of world trade 1968	84.8%	15.2%
Share of world trade 1988	87.1%	12.9%
Annual per capita utilisation of energy (kilowatts per year)	3.2 (USA 9)	0.28
Losses from trade protectionism/yr		
Agriculture		\$100 billion
Textiles		\$50 billion

and Rwanda haunts us today, and the industrialized world continues to impose austere structural adjustment programs that divert resources away from food, education, health, and welfare in poor countries to repay debts that can in reality never be repaid.^{13,15}

The wealthy, productive, and fortunate in the world cannot be burdened with all of the blame for the complex series of historical developments that polarize the world. However, insight is required into the complex adverse social forces initiated and sustained over centuries,^{4,10,14,19,20} which, with destabilizing effects of “independence” under adverse conditions,^{21,22} distanced and further separated many developing countries from the industrialized world.⁴ Regrettably, disparities between rich and poor within industrialized nations have essentially similar causes,^{4,9,14} highlighting the pervasiveness of adverse economic policies and the need to ameliorate these policies to improve social stability.²³

Ecological Implications

Domination and subordination through exploitation of people is not the whole story. For centuries, the goals of philosophy and science had been the search for wisdom in understanding the natural order and endeavoring to live in harmony with it. Since the scientific revolution, this integrative approach to nature has shifted toward an aggressive quest to dominate nature in pursuit of economic growth that has, until recently, included little concern for its profound ecological and, hence, evolutionary consequences. “We are destroying the life support systems of this planet and threaten-

ing not only civilization as we know it, but also the survival of our species. . . . Cumulative use of fossil fuels has doubled every twenty years since 1890.”²⁴ The world has lost 500 million acres of trees since 1972 (roughly one third the area of the continental United States). Lakes, rivers, even whole seas have been turned into sewers and industrial swamps.²⁵ The 1 billion people residing in industrialized countries use 10 times the resources and produce 10 times the waste per capita of the 4 billion people residing in developing countries.²⁴ What is needed now, as never before, is a major shift in our way of thinking about the future.^{24–26}

Africa

The African continent has been most severely affected by the temporal relationship of the powerful social forces described earlier to its economic and political development.^{18,21,27–30} The desperate condition of Africa has recently been reviewed from differing but complementary perspectives.^{31,32} The withdrawal of industrialized nations from even attempting to deal with the dire condition of the African continent is reflected in the writings of political scientists. “The crisis is so diffuse and of such magnitude that the United States and the world at large shrink from engaging it.”³⁰ “In fact, history mocks the very idea of an international coalition to save Africa.”²⁷ Economic analysts now suggest that “with the end of the Cold War, Africa has lost whatever political lustre it may once have had.”²⁷ Southern countries are weaker individually and collectively than 15 years ago, and the debt crises have reduced their control over their own economic destinies.³³

International affairs in the 1990s are increasingly dominated by economic affairs. As the Cold War recedes, there is the danger that it will be replaced by trade wars between the three major northern economic blocks and that increased competition between southern countries may extend to armed (even nuclear) conflict.³³

Deeply troubling questions persist and cannot be ignored. As Gill has asked in his powerful account of Africa: Whose industries benefit from continuing underdevelopment in the Third World? Whose consumers benefit from primary products that keep African producers just above the bread line? Whose bankers benefit from Third World indebtedness? Whose arms manufacturers benefit from African arms races? Whose delicate consciences are soothed by the giving of modest gifts?¹⁸ Hancock has documented these concerns in a devastating critique of the inefficiency, inadequacies, and corruption associated with many official international development aid projects.¹³

Human Rights and International Ethics

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has no enforcement machinery, yet as a statement of aspirations it has served as the basis for constitutions and bills of rights in many countries. Regrettably, worldwide paper support for such human rights is frequently not followed in practice.^{7,8} In a discussion of such widespread violations of the declaration, a South African activist,³⁴ outspokenly critical of industrialized nations’ morality, has suggested that the statement “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” is not a

social fact either in any liberal democracy rooted in the laissez-faire principles of capitalism or in socialist countries.

There is no equality between the peoples of the First and the Third Worlds and there is no equality between a child born in an African township and one born in a white suburb. The child in the slum is born neither within dignity nor in dignity and he or she is born with practically no rights. . . . Theologically, we are born free and equal, sociologically we are born into differential socio-economic-emotional situations; and in the world in which we live sociology defines our reality. . . . On a global level the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights] fails because of the ethnocentric satisfaction of developed countries with their own state of freedom and their general unconcern for the freedom of others. . . . Those under their jurisdiction, as colonized or, in the sense of capitalistic exploitation, continue to be treated as lesser people, deserving of lesser rights whatever the noble articulations of the First World. . . . Self interest and expediency, and not mutual concerns for each other's freedom and dignity, govern international relations.³⁴

The depressing reality of this view is intensified by the despicable attitude that two thirds of all of the people in the world are "superfluous from the perspective of the market. By and large we do not need what they have; they can't buy what we sell."³⁵ Inconsistencies in human rights standards demanded of other nations by powerful nations, the lack of self-assessment regarding rights that a monitoring country itself violates, and the consequent influence on human rights elsewhere should also be noted.^{36,37} Human rights are most at risk when political, military, and economic considerations become the overwhelming preoccupation of governments.⁸

These concerns should not be misinterpreted as a "collectivist" critique of Western liberal values; rather, they underscore the clash between competing elements of the liberal agenda: human rights and the expansion of free trade.² The financial revolution that has been associated with massive expansion of the world economy since the Second World War, together with the revolution in communications that encourages international speculation and instantaneous transfers of vast sums of money, has fostered the growth of an integrated global economy. This has allowed multinational corporations, unfettered by the democratic requirement of accountability, to wield great economic and political power. Through such processes, the combined assets of the top 300 firms in the world now constitute roughly 25% of the world's productive assets. Their formidable economic power and transnational mobility increas-

ingly undermine the ability of national governments to provide the legal, monetary, or protective functions necessary for a well-working national economy. The trillion-dollar-a-day market for foreign exchange effectively places the valuation of any nation's currency at the pleasure of the "market" rather than at the discretion of its monetary authorities, thus disrupting the relationship between the economy and the state. Less than 10% of the trillions of dollars transacted across financial networks are for trade in goods and services. Of the 5.6 billion people in the world, about 3.6 billion have no cash or credit with which to make purchases, and more and more people are clamoring to get into the global labor pool. The naive view that these trends can only be beneficial has been contested, and some of the adverse implications of such "irresponsible forces" (both for industrialized democracies and for developing countries) have been described.³⁸⁻⁴⁰

Overemphasis on market forces and on civil and political rights has eclipsed the need to affirm the associated social and economic rights that foster essential community values.^{39,41} A broader formulation of human rights must include state and corporate duties to avoid depriving, duties to protect from deprivation, and duties to aid the deprived.⁴² Articulating the problems of living in the modern world and vigorously proposing possible solutions to the appalling conditions confronting humanity today must become intellectual and political priorities if human rights are to be more widely achieved.^{39,41,43} The challenges involved in redistribution of wealth, propagation of the education and skills required to sustain development, and reparations for centuries of human and environmental exploitation are fraught with difficulty.^{40,44,45} They are, however, surely essential both within nations (as in the new South Africa) and at the global level to ensure that progress since the scientific revolution is not limited to the rich at the increasing expense of the poor.^{4,14,38-40,44-46}

Medical Practice and Health for All

The foregoing suggests an analogy between global trends and Western medical practice. Advances in medicine and technology have provided many with much celebrated relief from suffering, hope for cure, and additional years of productive and satisfying lives but, through overaggressive approaches to transplantation and use of technology, have also inflicted intense suf-

fering on others in the quest for new knowledge.^{47,48}

The progressively dominating influence of "economic rationality" (with money as the bottom line) in medical care and its bureaucratic implementation by powerful multinational drug companies, insurance companies, and managers are also impoverishing the concept of medicine as a caring profession. "Increasingly, physicians find themselves engaged in bureaucratic and political struggles that sap their time and energy, exhaust their patience for treating uninsured people, and erode their dignity."⁴⁹ Impressive scientific and medical advances with profound impacts on human well-being have, regrettably, become associated with an inequitable, costly "medical industrial complex" within the most powerful nation on earth.⁵⁰

Market-driven health care in a powerful nation has profound symbolic and material effects on health services worldwide. Health care delivery is being transformed from a professional service delivered with dedication, concern, and compassion within mutually rewarding and trusting healing relationships⁴⁹⁻⁵¹ toward the sale of a commodity in an adversarial marketplace in which professional satisfaction from patient care is being eroded and increasingly replaced by rewards external to the professional service: satisfying health service bureaucrats and acquiring wealth, scientific fame, and prestige among peers. Legitimation of this transition transmits a powerful message that gravely undermines the will and ability of other nations to develop and sustain equitable access to affordable health care. Established national health systems (for example, those in Canada and the United Kingdom) are fracturing under the influence of the market model, and health care reform in the new South Africa is being largely confined within a shrinking and weakened public sector while a bloated private sector continues largely unaffected.⁵²

Efforts to reverse these trends by dedicated and enlightened physicians^{50,51,53-55} are supported by professional organizations in the United States^{56,57} and through changes in medical education that incorporate education in the humanities into the medical curriculum.^{58,59} However, health care reform in the United States, and elsewhere, remains an elusive goal. Debate must go beyond medical education and the physician/patient relationship to include consideration of macro-allocation of resources, the structure of health care systems, and ways to deliver health care that will enhance the dignity and lives of individual patients and advance population

health. Recognizing international disparities in health and health care provision as the single gravest problem of medical ethics challenges physicians, lawyers, and ethicists to become involved in global aspects of justice, human rights, and health care.⁶⁰⁻⁶⁷

The Future

Complex interlocking contributions to the emergence of an unequal world need to be openly acknowledged and addressed if progress is to be made toward widespread achievement of human rights and improved population health.^{3,4,10,42-44,63-71} Sustaining human development requires a much more sophisticated approach than can be achieved through paternalistic dispensation by well-intentioned but largely unaccountable aid agencies^{13,18} or through World Bank loans.⁷¹ The 1991 Human Development Report describes a human development index (calculated on the basis of literacy and life expectancy, as well as per capita GNP) that goes beyond economic considerations alone and suggests linking financial aid to human development rather than merely to consumption, as a strategy to accelerate human development as a unifying concern for both industrialized and developing countries.¹⁰

There is now also growing acknowledgment of the enormous disparity between expenditure on military endeavors and on sustainable development and of the potential for the diversion of resources to the latter in order to foster self-actualization and self-sufficiency, which could help spread respect for and achievement of human rights.^{72,73} Linkage of economic growth with human rights through human well-being is the key to progress and is a unifying concern for developing and industrialized countries.^{10,44}

The operationalization of such processes through (1) cancellation of some of the unpayable debt accumulated by some of the poorest countries in the world,^{15,32} (2) continuing attempts to redirect military expenditures toward social development,⁷² (3) taxation on electronic financial transactions, and (4) suggestions such as those by Susser⁶⁵ and others^{66,67} to advance the achievement of global health and human rights are the challenges of the future. These challenges, it is hoped, will be advanced through linkage with the planned World Health Organization proposal for a global health charter.⁷⁴

There is also a need for us to begin to understand diverse world views and value

systems.⁷⁵ Progress lies not in propagating false dichotomies but, rather, in working to acquire deeper understandings of differences and the willingness to create solidarity through greater identification with common human attributes and aspirations.^{68,69} Wealthy nations that show concern largely for their own short-term economic self-interest could consider whether they are unintentionally behaving like countries that failed to identify with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The credibility of their commitment to contributing to achieving a broad range of human rights for all is now in the world's spotlight. Their ability to acknowledge and act on their awesome responsibility to humanity will shape the world's future.

The universal humanistic ideals for which medicine strives are, like human rights for all, unattainable without serious attention to the concept of international interdependence and the consequent restructuring of health care systems, especially those in powerful and wealthy nations that serve as role models for the world.^{57,76,77} The American Association for the Advancement of Science has demonstrated vision and admirable moral responsibility in its call for a human rights approach to health care reform.⁵⁷ Further support could be provided through forging closer links between the bioethics movement and the promotion of human rights.^{65-67,78-80} These ideas, like the call for transnational actions by physicians and lawyers,^{66,67} are embryonic but are increasingly widely shared^{73,74} and in need of much hard work to be developed into action plans.

The complexity of these tasks should not be a deterrent. As the celebrated Nigerian author Chinua Achebe has stated, despair should not eclipse hope: "neither history nor legend encourages us to believe that a man who sits on his fellow will some day climb down on the basis of sounds reaching him from below. And yet we must consider how so much more dangerous our already very perilous world would become if the oppressed everywhere should despair altogether of invoking reason and humanity to arbitrate their cause."⁸¹ □

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