MEETING OF THE STATES PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON THE PROHIBITION OF THE DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTION AND STOCKPILING OF BACTERIOLOGICAL (BIOLOGICAL) AND TOXIN WEAPONS AND ON THEIR DESTRUCTION

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Consideration of the content, promulgation, and adoption of codes of conduct for scientists

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHIC NORMS AND CODES OF CONDUCT FOR SCIENTISTS MAJORING IN BIOSCIENCES

Prepared by the Russian Federation

1. Over the past few years the adoption of ethic codes of conduct for scientists majoring in biology and biotechnology or in research into contagious diseases has been widely discussed. In his letter, dated December 8, 2004 Ambassador John Freeman, Chairman of the 2005 meetings of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological and Toxin Weapons (BTWC), defined the adoption of ethic codes of conduct as an additional measure to reinforce scientists' and experts' responsibilities for the results of their work in the above-mentioned life sciences.

2. It is no secret that many technologies employed in biology and biotechnology have so-called "dual use" potential. The BTWC, which places the responsibility for fulfilling the obligations related to the prohibition and non-proliferation of biological weapons on the States Parties, contains clear-cut provisions stipulating the peaceful uses of such technologies. The meeting of the experts of the BTWC States Parties held in 2003 clearly showed that the issues of non-proliferation of technologies and materials with "dual use" potential, either by natural or legal persons must be regulated by national legislation. The Russian Federation believes that this would be an effective measure to counter the proliferation of knowledge and technologies capable of damaging the life and health of people, animals, plants and natural diversity in general. In principle, the adoption of so-called "ethic codes of conduct for scientists" can be effective if such codes are closely harmonized with the BTWC provisions.

3. The value of the codes of conduct for biologists (modeled after the medical code of ethics) as a measure of general humanitarian ethnic character (as opposed to the prohibitive one), which promotes the BTWC goals and principles, while forming a negative attitude towards research that breaches its provisions, is obvious.

4. Often the line between some forms and areas of research that can be possibly put into dual-use, is fuzzy and difficult to see. Research into virulence factors of an agent through selection is a case in point. On the one hand, it is a scientific tool to study biological properties of an agent and approaches for protecting against it, and on the other hand it can develop highly dangerous strains. A scientist working in a research institution is bound both by plans and scientific specialization of the institution's activities and applicable national laws. This may be quite sufficient to exercise control. At the same time, he or she must know the law and realize that any violation of the law is not only criminal but also immoral.

5. It might be appropriate to remind the understanding of the essence of ethics and morality common in Russia. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language (S.I. Ozhegov, N.Y. Shvedova) defines ethics as "a set of standards of conduct" (usually applicable to a social group): parliamentary ethics, medical ethics, ethics of a scientist. The Dictionary describes morality as "intrinsic spiritual qualities guiding a person; ethical norms - behavioral rules governed by these qualities."

6. In general it is difficult to define ethical standards of conduct. Actually these are community socialization rules. These rules may be of different type, including those set out in a separate document. They are based on a well-known principle "do as you would be done by". This principle, as translated into concrete norms, is formulated in a different way in different communities. Every now and then such principles are being subject to criticism, which sparks off intense debate.

7. Usually the issue of ethics in a specific field arises when:

(i) activities in this field are determined by personal, professional and legal relations;

(ii) such field has developed to a point when it is clear that much depends not only on legal regulations and legislative control, but also on corporate culture and certain partnership rules recognized in the community;

(iii) ethic standards and traditions in the field have not yet developed or do not work as they are supposed to while lack thereof impedes further progress in the field.

8. The need for an ethic code of conduct especially manifests itself in crises when the concepts of "good" and "bad" are prone to transformation. Legislative regulations also tend to change in such circumstances, making ethic standards vitally important. When a community seeks to formulate its own ethic standards, to a certain extent their adoption is a preventive measure. A professional community needs to solve its ethic problems independently by introducing restrictions based on law before they are introduced by the bureaucracy through a rigorous regulatory system.

9. The established ethic standards attest to high professionalism of an association or a group of people pursuing a common goal or solving a common problem. Proceeding from widely recognized humanitarian principles they should attract like-minded people. The ethic standards of professional associations do not merely reflect commonplace provisions, when spelled out and articulated, they make the result-oriented activities clearer and dear to a wider circle of persons and organizations involved, and provide moral ground for the joint activities.

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