Editorial for the thematic section “social responsibility and health”

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Abstract The contributions collected in this section deal with some of the most crucial issues addressed in the Report on “Social Responsibility and Health” of the International Bioethics Committee: the importance of ‘social responsibility’ in the promotion of health, i.e. far beyond the context of the ethics of management and private companies where the term was introduced at first; the role of solidarity as a necessary presupposition for a genuinely universalistic morality of justice; the content of the right to health care, especially when we consider it as a ‘legal’ right; the quest for efficiency in health care policies, which is indispensable if we want to effectively extend the enjoyment of progressively higher standard of health; the sense of responsibility in the context of professional activities; the decision making procedures that are to be implemented in order to achieve a fair and just allocation of resources.

Keywords Social responsibility · Health · Unesco · Solidarity

The *Report on Social Responsibility and Health*, finalized by the International Bioethics Committee of Unesco in November 2009 during the sixteenth ordinary session of the Committee in Mexico City, features a wide reflection on Article 14 of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, adopted by acclamation by the General Conference in October 2005. Article 14 reads as follows:

1. The promotion of health and social development for their people is a central purpose of governments that all sectors of society share.
2. Taking into account that enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition, progress in science and technology should advance:
 - a) access to quality health care and essential medicines, especially for the health of women and children, because health is essential to life itself and must be considered to be a social and human good;
 - b) access to adequate nutrition and water;
 - c) improvement of living conditions and the environment;
 - d) elimination of the marginalization and the exclusion of persons on the basis of any grounds;
 - e) reduction of poverty and illiteracy.

The Article is very complex and broadens the traditional agenda of bioethics. The Report is indeed the final result of a long reflection which began just after the adoption of the Universal Declaration, and entwines many different aspects and questions in its four main chapters. The second one, after the Introduction, is devoted to the *social determinants of health and constraints to healthcare access*: it points out the various circumstances and contexts of people’s lives which are to be considered as obstacles or even causes of discrimination and exclusion with regard to the right of everyone to enjoy ‘the highest attainable standard of health’. We are speaking of factors such as income and social status, education, physical environment, working conditions, social support networks, culture and traditions,

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genetics, personal behaviour, health services, differences between men and women as to the types of diseases in specific conditions and at different ages. The third chapter focuses on *the ethical and legal dimensions of social responsibility and health* and copes with issues such as the emergence of the notion of social responsibility, the content of the notion of health and its status as 'good' and 'human right', the overlapping of the commitment to social responsibility and to other fundamental principles of the Declaration: justice, solidarity, equality. The Report goes on sketching four *special areas of focus* (health care, research, industry, education) and six *courses of action* (decision-making procedures, transnational scope, national bioethics committees, quality assurance in health care, global health risks, media). The last paragraph of the *Conclusions* makes it once again explicit that meeting the aspirations highlighted in Article 14 requires a strong ability to foster 'our common humanity' in all its various aspects and a 'profound and active acceptance of our interconnectedness'.

The contributions collected in this section deal with some of the most crucial issues addressed in the Report of

the Committee: the importance of 'social responsibility' in the promotion of health, i.e. far beyond the context of the ethics of management and private companies where the term was introduced at first; the role of solidarity as a necessary presupposition for a genuinely universalistic morality of justice; the content of the right to health care, especially when we consider it as a 'legal' right; the quest for efficiency in health care policies, which is indispensable if we want to effectively extend the enjoyment of progressively higher standard of health; the sense of responsibility in the context of professional activities; the decision making procedures that are to be implemented in order to achieve a fair and just allocation of resources. Of course, many other aspects are well worth analyzing at a deeper level and involve competences in very different fields: medicine, law, ethics, sociology, economics. Social responsibility is and will remain at the crossroads of a multidisciplinary task, exactly because the promotion of health cannot be conceived but as a central purpose both for governments and all sectors of society.