ABSTRACT. In the field of bioethics, scholars have begun to consider carefully the impact of structural issues on global population health, including socioeconomic and political factors influencing the disproportionate burden of disease throughout the world. Human rights and social justice are key considerations for both population health and biomedical research. In this paper, I will briefly explore approaches to human rights in bioethics and review guidelines for ethical conduct in international health research, focusing specifically on health research conducted in resource-poor settings. I will demonstrate the potential for addressing human rights considerations in international health research with special attention to the importance of collaborative partnerships, capacity building, and respect for cultural traditions. Strengthening professional knowledge about international research ethics increases awareness of ethical concerns associated with study design and informed consent among researchers working in resource-poor settings. But this is not enough. Technological and financial resources are also necessary to build capacity for local communities to ensure that research results are integrated into existing health systems. Problematic issues surrounding the application of ethical guidelines in resource-poor settings are embedded in social history, cultural context, and the global political economy. Resolving the moral complexities requires a commitment to engaged dialogue and action among investigators, funding agencies, policy makers, governmental institutions, and private industry.

KEY WORDS: cultural pluralism, human rights, international health research, research ethics

“Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.” Marley’s Ghost to Scrooge

INTRODUCTION

The quality of life and the experience of suffering or health for individuals and populations worldwide are influenced profoundly by social, political, and economic factors. Stark inequalities in health-
care exist throughout the world. In industrialized settings globally, many individuals have access to excellent public health resources and state-of-the-art medical therapies and vaccines. In bleak contrast, individuals and communities in resource-poor nations are burdened with high rates of infectious diseases, inadequate public health conditions, and insufficient or inaccessible medical care. Moreover, less than 10% of global expenditures for health research by private and public sectors are devoted to addressing 90% of the world’s health problems. This extraordinary statistic – referred to as the “10/90 gap” – significantly affects the health of developing nations and it has implications for the implementation of international health research. Additionally, multinational pharmaceutical industries are responsible for a significant share of global expenditures on health research and development and individuals in industrialized countries are the primary consumers of pharmaceuticals. As Benatar pointedly asks, “If drugs for malaria, tuberculosis, many tropical diseases, and HIV/AIDS have not been made available to billions in poor countries is it likely that the poor will benefit from advances in biotechnology?”

In the field of bioethics, scholars have begun to consider carefully the impact of structural issues on global population health, including socioeconomic and political factors influencing the disproportionate burden of disease throughout the world. Human rights and social justice are key considerations for both population health and biomedical research. In this paper, I will briefly explore approaches to human rights in bioethics and review guidelines for ethical conduct in international health research, focusing specifically on health research conducted in resource-poor settings. Finally, I will demonstrate the potential for addressing human rights considerations in international health research with special attention to the importance of collaborative partnerships, capacity building, and respect for cultural traditions.

HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURAL PLURALISM, AND BIOETHICS

In his examination of human rights and bioethics, Thomasma distinguishes between three procedural and four substantive rules that could form the basis of an international multicultural bioethics. Thomasma describes three procedural rules: (1) the rule of peaceful