



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

THE BIOETHICAL ISSUE OF NON VOLUNTARY STERILIZATION

(20th November 1998)

abstract

In this document the NBC deals with the problem of involuntary sterilization and its ethically acceptable limits. The document – after outlining the historical, technical, judicial and social aspects of the problem – focuses on some terminological clarifications. Sterilization is defined as “any act (and particularly any medical act) intended to cause sterility in a subject capable of procreation”, the NBC draws attention to different forms, concentrating on the possible motives at the basis of anti-procreative sterilization: contraception, social (ritual and eugenic sterilization), and public aims (demographic and sanctioned sterilization).

The NBC believes that when there is no direct therapeutic reason, voluntary sterilization can encounter legitimate medical and ethical objections, sufficient to justify the physician's refusal to provide professional services. Forced sterilization, both in juridical and ethical terms, is always to be considered illicit, whoever may deliberate its being carried out or whatever the motive. Consequently, the following are to be stigmatized:

- ritual sterilization, because the respect due to all cultures does not imply acceptance of practices which affect the corporeality of the human person in a coercive and irreversible manner, depriving its identity of an essential dimension;

- sterilization of criminals, inflicted on those who have committed sex crimes, the principles of defense of the integrity of the body of the offender and the non discrimination of innocent and guilty life are recalled;

- demographic sterilization, considering that the implementation of this policy resorts directly or indirectly to coercive techniques, it is to be condemned on bioethical grounds, as it is an offence to human dignity and a person's fundamental rights;

- eugenic sterilization, especially of the disabled, as it does not respect the dignity of the person with disabilities, as it is motivated by the intent to facilitate or economise on the activity of caring for the actual patient.