

**Bishop Prof Martin Hein, Kassel**

**Visit of the „German Cancer Research Center“ Heidelberg,  
30/11/2018.**

**I.**

First of all I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation to make a short ethical comment on what I've experienced during my stay in this famous Research Center.

Let me start with a very personal und biographical approach:

My parents both, father and mother, died of cancer: My father in 1971, my mother in 1983. It was an existential experience for me that neither my father nor my mother could get any healing by medical treatment. Very early in my life cancer disrupted and destroyed my family life.

So you could probably imagine that **personally** I'm absolutely interested in cancer research progresses.

But it is not only my biographical background that leads me to this conviction. Looking at the statistics we have to realize that the number of people dying because of cancer in Germany is constantly increasing: It reached to amount of 233.753 persons. And approximately 4 million people live with the experience of cancer in their own life.

We have to realize that there is a lively **public** interest to promote cancer research (beside other factors as prevention by early detection).

## II.

Recognizing this strong public interest one may doubt that any ethical questions could exist. It seems to be clear: Is it not self-evident to make all efforts on this very important research-objective?

I've been invited as former member of the German Council of Ethics and particularly as protestant theologian and bishop.

This fact brings me to an incidental remark: Christian ethics doesn't claim to be the special ethics only for Christians but gives orientation to all people – believers, followers of a different faith or non-believers – for a better and balanced life of the whole human community.

The bible as source of Christian faith is not meant as an handbook or manual that gives us immediate and direct answers to all ethical challenges. That would be a severe misunderstanding!

The texts of the bible have to be interpreted in the context of our present life and understanding. Otherwise the bible becomes a kind of statute book that hasn't any real relevance for the ethical problems we try to face and to deliberate.

For a reasonable appraisal of every ethical problem I give you three criteria:

- a) Knowledge about what it does concern – and about what it doesn't concern (including a certain expertise)
- b) Explanation of the orientation framework (in my case: the Christian background)
- c) Statement of reasons for the taken decision

### III.

The progresses in cancer research are undeniable. Could there be any ethical questions at all?

I think three fields in cancer research could be touched:

a) Animal testing:

The current research requires a high amount of **living creature**. How to deal with that? Is it allowed to use animals for medical purposes?

b) Limitations of our financial resources:

How can we achieve an adequate **distribution justice** (compared to other medical researches and diseases)? Distribution justice includes also the question of the allocation of medical treatment: Whom do we select from the large number of patients?

c) Limitations of our knowledge and – especially – of our life:

We don't know everything and we don't live eternally in this world.

### IV.

Under these three requirements I try to give you some first answers from a Christian-protestant perspective:

a) Under very different conditions as we have the apostle Paul speaks about the "groan" of the whole creation (Rom 8,22). That means we must find a balance between the interest of research and the use of animals. Using animals should be done under the pre-limitation: as few as possible and to suffer as little as possible.

New digital approaches can probably decrease the animal testing.

b) The limitations of financial resources leads us to an extremely careful handling and accounting of the funds received.

The keyword is **accountability** (transparency of research objective, research methods and financial usage).

- c) The limitations of knowledge cause the awareness to avoid false and unrealistic healing promises. We have to tackle with failures and remaining diseases. This gives us a certain calmness to our self-understanding as researchers.
- d) And a last point relating to the aspect of limitations: Perhaps we should also develop a new understanding of health. In addition to all efforts in research we do need models of living **with** cancer not as a damaged or reduced life, but as a liveable life supported by medical care.

## V.

Summarizing:

Ethics in this sense doesn't prevent cancer researches but brings it to a robust and reasonable basis and is enabling a reflected discussion!

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