The abuse of genetics. Lessons from the past, lessons for the future

Any rapidly evolving field of science and medicine such as medical genetics needs to pause at intervals to assess where it is going. In so doing, it is also wise to examine the past, in particular what can be learned from previous mistakes. The publication in English translation of Professor Benno Müller-Hill's book *Murderous science—elimination by scientific selection of Jews, Gypsies, and others, Germany 1933–1945*, reviewed on page 860 of this issue, makes such an examination especially timely.

The facts reported in this book concerning the abuse of genetics, eugenics, and psychiatry in the extermination of the mentally ill and handicapped and those considered to be genetically inferior are not in themselves new. Yet how many younger workers in human and medical genetics are really aware of the details of these abuses? How many regard them as an issue potentially affecting the practice and development of the speciality today, rather than a chapter from history, now closed? For the great majority, at least outside Germany itself, to read this book will be a profoundly disturbing experience. Not only does it give vivid detail of what for many of us have been abstract generalities, but it also shows how the scientific and medical community of the time made the abuse possible, by inaction as well as by their actions, and how in many cases they benefitted from them.

While the political circumstances responsible for the abuses in Germany may have been unique, the scientific attitudes underlying them have been far more widespread, as shown in another book (Kevles, *In the name of eugenics*), reviewed in the Journal in September 1987. Both British and American scientists were responsible for the development of eugenic ideas (and in the case of the USA, policies) that influenced their counterparts in Germany. Some of these ideas are far from defunct and could again become part of Government programmes in medical genetics in other parts of the world.

In some ways the potential for the abuse of genetics is now greater than ever, not because of the political climate, but because the underlying technology has become so much more powerful. While genetic manipulation is the advance most in the public eye in this respect, greater dangers at present come from the possible misuse of computerised registers for genetic disorders, and from the inappropriate uses of predictive tests. Huntington's disease provides a notable example of all these potential dangers, and it may well be wondered how much greater harm to families with genetic disorders might have arisen had these developments been available in the 1930s.

In ensuring to the best of our ability that medical genetics is not abused in the future, the advice of Professor Emery in his review "to maintain open and free societies and persistent vigilance" is paramount. The two books mentioned here should be read by all workers in genetics, whether basic research scientists or clinicians involved in the prevention of genetic disorders. As scientists and physicians, we should perhaps add an additional vigilance to ensure that the success and development of our own particular field of work is not placed above its benefit to the families for whom we are attempting to provide a service.

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