UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening of
the International Congress of Bioethics 2005

Tehran, 26 March 2005
Your Excellency Mr President of the Islamic Republic of Iran,  
Mr Minister of Science, Research and Technology,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I open the International Congress of Bioethics 2005 together with President Khatami at the start of the new Iranian year. This Congress was originally intended to be a follow-up to the Round Table of Ministers of Science on “Bioethics: International Implications” held in Paris on 22 and 23 October 2001, where more than 100 Ministers of Science and ministerial representatives gathered and discussed urgent issues in the field of bioethics. On that occasion, the representative of the Iranian Government announced that they would host a meeting on bioethics in Tehran, which I was pleased to support. Initially planned to take place in 2003, the Congress was postponed owing to unavoidable circumstances.

Two years on, the issues are no less crucial for the international community: rapid developments in science and technology are still increasingly affecting our understanding of life, and resulting in a strong demand for a global response to the ethical implications of such developments. For this reason, organizing both international and regional conferences on bioethics is extremely important. Given its mandate to stimulate intellectual debate in general and to promote bioethical discussion in particular, UNESCO is very pleased to support the International Congress of Bioethics 2005 here in Tehran.

My special gratitude goes to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran – in particular, President Mohammad Khatami - for hosting this important Congress, which provides us with a timely opportunity to listen to high-level experts from more than 15 countries with a long-standing record in bioethical research.

Allow me to express my sincere thanks to the organizers of the meeting - the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of Iran, its Minister Dr Jafar Tofighi and the National Research Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, whose Director, Mr Mohammad Hossein Sanati, is the Secretary of the Congress. My gratitude is indeed due to all those who have contributed to preparing this event. The warm welcome we have all received is much appreciated.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The importance of ethical reflection on the rapid advances in the field of biotechnology, genetics and other life sciences increases day by day. Scientists, philosophers, policy-makers, the media and the general public should be involved in
assessing the social and ethical implications of these remarkable developments. On the one hand, the media bring us daily reports of findings in science that have the potential to be used in medical treatments and applied towards the prevention of diseases. On the other hand, certain applications of biotechnology and genetics arouse a profound fear and anxiety that the sanctity of human life might be compromised and human dignity violated if careful ethical consideration is not given to these applications.

One such concern has been raised in relation to the question of intellectual property rights in the field of genetics. When the announcement was made four years ago that human genome mapping was near completion, the question of the ‘patentability’ of the human genome received widespread attention. Given the significance of this issue, UNESCO organized an international symposium on “Ethics, Intellectual Property Rights and Genomics” from 30 January to 1 February 2001 in Paris. At this Symposium, different legal provisions concerning the ‘patentability’ of the human genome by European, American and Japanese patent offices were identified, which again pointed to the need for dialogue on the international level in this matter. Although efforts have been made by the international community to resolve this issue for a considerable time, new findings in genetics and molecular biology constantly raise more questions. This important issue is on the agenda of this Congress and we look forward to the debates and exchanges that will take place.

Another difficult problem that we faced in recent years is the application of cloning techniques to human embryos. The international community has unequivocally denounced human cloning for reproductive purposes, as stated in the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1997 at its 29th Session. Article 11 of the Declaration states that “Practices which are contrary to human dignity, such as reproductive cloning of human beings, shall not be permitted. States and competent international organizations are invited to co-operate in identifying such practices and in taking, at national or international level, the measures necessary to ensure that the principles set out in this Declaration are respected”. This Declaration was endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1998.

It is on the basis of this Declaration that the United Nations Legal Committee began in 2002 to discuss the elaboration of a United Nations convention against the reproductive cloning of human beings. Over the past three years, UNESCO has strongly supported this project and has provided substantial contributions at the meetings of the Legal Committee on this issue. No Member State has opposed the prohibition of human cloning for reproductive purposes. In this sense, consensus has long been reached among Member States of the United Nations.
However, the question of so-called therapeutic or research cloning has aroused controversy. Unlike reproductive cloning, the purpose of so-called therapeutic cloning is to create an embryo using the cloning technique in order to produce embryonic stem cells compatible with the cells of patients and use them for future treatments. Some countries have enacted national legislation that permits the conduct of such research but other countries oppose the creation of an embryo for destruction, even though the purpose is to develop treatments for patients.

Different positions concerning so-called therapeutic cloning continue to divide Member States of the United Nations. In December 2004, the Member States decided to draft a UN declaration against human cloning instead of a convention, and a Working Group was established for that purpose. On March 9, by a vote of 84 in favour, 34 against, 37 abstentions, and 36 absent, the UN General Assembly adopted a non-binding Declaration calling on all UN Member States to ban all forms of human cloning, inasmuch as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life.

The difficulty that the United Nations has faced in drafting a human cloning declaration illustrates the complexity of bioethical discussion within the international community, where those from different religious and cultural backgrounds come together to address such matters as the beginning of life and the protection of embryos. The voting I have just referred to in the UN illustrates the state of play in the matter, even though there is a clear majority in favour of what has been adopted. Nevertheless, our task is to find an internationally harmonized way to resolve bioethical dilemmas, respecting the different cultures and values existing in different societies. One set of values should not be imposed on other societies, nor should the particular needs and situations in different regions of the world be neglected. This is a principle that is at the heart of UNESCO’s approach to standard-setting, where the reaching of consensus is central to our practices.

In the field of bioethics, UNESCO has therefore also been mandated by Member States to take a leading role in the area of standard-setting. The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights adopted in 1997 and the International Declaration on Human Genetic Data adopted in 2003 are examples of UNESCO’s accomplishments in this field.

Furthermore, at its 32nd session in 2003, the General Conference of UNESCO considered it “opportune and desirable to set universal standards in the field of bioethics with due regard for human dignity and human rights and freedoms, in the spirit of cultural pluralism inherent in bioethics”. The General Conference therefore entrusted me with the task of presenting to it, at its 33rd session in October 2005, a Draft Declaration on Universal Norms on Bioethics.
The drafting group of the International Bioethics Committee (IBC), chaired by Justice Michael Kirby, worked with a highly intensive schedule throughout 2004. In 2004, there were six meetings of the Drafting Group, three sessions of the IBC, two written consultations and numerous other consultations at the international, regional and national levels. Since the beginning of the elaboration of this Declaration, the quality of the text and the transparency of the process of elaboration have been highly commended by concerned parties.

The Preliminary Draft Declaration covers the general principles in the field of bioethics as a whole, such as human dignity and human rights, justice and equity, non-discrimination, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality. Its aim is to establish basic principles and conditions to be recognized internationally and to assist Member States in the elaboration of legislation or guidelines to implement these principles. It also aims to promote dialogue within societies, to disseminate information and to ensure the sharing of benefits achieved by scientific progress. Recognizing the importance of social responsibility for the well-being of humankind, the draft declaration, taking into account comments formulated in the framework of various consultations, now goes beyond ethics in the field of biomedicine and biology by stipulating principles of equity in health care, adequate nutrition and water, poverty reduction and improved environmental conditions.

Finally, it should be noted that experts have recommended that the former title of the Declaration be changed into “Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights”, in order to recognize the importance of protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms in all decisions and practices involving bioethical issues.

The Draft Declaration was finalized by the International Bioethics Committee at its Extraordinary Session held in Paris in January 2005 and it now awaits examination at the intergovernmental experts meetings to be held from 4 to 6 April and from 21 to 23 June 2005. The process whereby this Declaration and its main provisions have been elaborated will be presented later today by Professor Michèle Jean, the Chairperson of the IBC.

Pending the holding of these intergovernmental meetings, I think it is extremely important that high-level meetings continue to take place, in order to discuss and anticipate difficulties that might arise in the future and to sensitize the international community to issues that lie at the heart of our present political and scientific concerns. I know from its agenda that this Congress will address the issue of the Declaration on bioethics, but also other complex questions, such as gene technology and ethics, including cloning, stem cell research and tissue transplantation; molecular biology and intellectual property rights; and ethics education. I am confident that you will succeed in helping us to make solid assessments of the challenges presented to us
by bioethics in these areas, and look forward to your providing UNESCO with concrete proposals and suggestions to guide our future action in the field of bioethics.

In this regard, I would like to confirm to this honorable audience that, if our Member States agree, the ethics of science and technology, with a special emphasis on bioethics, will continue to be the principal priority of the UNESCO Human and Social Science Sector in the next biennium (2006-2007). Thus, I trust UNESCO will make the best use possible of your recommendations to assure coherence in its programmes and activities and consolidate its role as a laboratory of ideas, a capacity-builder in Member States and a catalyst for international cooperation in the field of bioethics.

In closing, I would like to thank all the speakers and participants for coming to this important Congress. I am pleased to see that this event has drawn many participants from abroad as well as national experts who have contributed to the programme. It remains for me to wish you every success in your deliberations.

Thank you.