

## List do redakcji • Letter to the Editor

### Epidemia nowotworów złośliwych: znak i znaczenie dla wartości humanistycznych

#### Cancer Epidemics: Sign and Significance for Human Values

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W dniach od 29 do 31 października 2004 roku w Krakowie na Wydziale Filozofii Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego miała miejsce Międzynarodowa Konferencja: Towards a New Renaissance: Values, Spirituality and the Future. W czasie jej trwania przedstawiliśmy nowy sposób podejścia do epidemii nowotworów złośliwych, posługując się formą refleksji filozoficznej, której prekursorem był przed laty profesor Józef Laskowski (1900-1970), który nazwał taki typ rozważań onkologią teoretyczną. Na obecnym etapie naszych poszukiwań onkologia teoretyczna jest filozoficzną próbą połączenia *scientia* i *conscientia* w celu możliwego pełnego poznania różnych aspektów fenomenu epidemii nowotworów złośliwych. Poniższy tekst jest streszczeniem naszego wystąpienia.

#### Cancer Epidemics: Sign and Significance for Human Values

As many as 5,317,905 new cancer cases and 3,522,366 deaths caused by cancer were registered worldwide in the year 2000. Cancer incidence in rich countries (Euro-Atlantic culture) was 1.96 times higher than in poor countries, despite cultural homogenisation and independently of differences in the age structure. The overall incidence of cancer is growing but the rates for various cancer types show fluctuations [1]. The survival rates had opposite tendency: in Poland, 30% of cancer patients survive 5 years after diagnosis, 45% do so in the EU, and 60% in the United States.

A cancer epidemic, like every epidemic in the history of the human being, is a sign that has its own significance. The rise of new cancer cases could be explained as a result of tension between nature (genes-matter) and culture (word-spirit). A cancer epidemic (like every epidemic before) is evidence that the continuity between nature and culture has been disrupted.

In our opinion, the now dominating economic definition of the human being is the cause of this disruption. It claims that consumption is the main goal of human life. According to this definition, the human being's needs are the same as his values, once transcendence has been removed. It has been confirmed that cancer is a disease of the genes. The consumption-centric definition of the human being encourages carcinogenic and genes-unfriendly lifestyles from early childhood.

The present culture with its (a) lack of authority, and (b) lack of hierarchy combined with the (c) "creeping anarchy" resembles the features of a cancer cell. For

a tumour, the number of cancer cells (quantity) and their ability to migrate are most important. Its cells never reach full maturity. They keep dividing endlessly, which makes them immortal in a way. But what matters most for the healthy cells is to reach maturity (quality). This allows them to carry out their tasks and then die using the mechanism of pre-programmed death (apoptosis). Cancer disease is, in a sense, the sign of our present-day culture where profit is more important than the human being and quantity, paradoxically, goes before quality.

This explanation of the cancer epidemic is certainly not synonymous with the understanding of all pathways responsible for carcinogenic processes within the population. However, this type of reflection allows to discover the "hidden ethical power" associated with such phenomena as the epidemics occurring throughout the human history. Epidemics of infectious diseases in the Middle Ages gave the origin and development of microbiology and antibiotics era. The cancer epidemics incited the development of genetic investigations concluded by Genom Project in 2003. On the other hand, the reflection on dying cancer patients provoke spiritual awakensness of the human being after the modernistic era.

The "hidden ethical power" of epidemics can mobilize human conscience and turn the evil into the good in various fields of the battle against epidemics. *Ipso facto* epidemics renovate balance between science and conscience.

Phenomena related to cancer epidemics are under investigation within the new branch of knowledge—theoretical oncology (cancer philosophy) – which we are working on at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Memorial Cancer Center and Institute of Oncology in Warsaw. Theoretical oncology seeks to find a key to cancer epidemics across a broadest possible spectrum of sciences involved in cancer research [2, 3].

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