



The scientific basis of ethics

To the Editor: The Templeton Prize was recently awarded to Professor George Ellis, mathematician/cosmologist of the University of Cape Town. The Templeton Prize is the world's largest, money-wise, and it is awarded annually to an individual who has done exceptional research or made discoveries in the field of spiritual realities. The award hardly caused a ripple in the local press, compared with what usually happens when yet another suicide bomber hits his target in the Middle East or two second-rate artists engage in fisticuffs at the Oudtshoorn KKNK. In a recent interview¹ Professor Ellis referred to his research work, as well as to his book *The Moral Nature of the Universe*, wherein he and his co-author, Nancy Murphy, put forward the argument that ethics, like mathematics, is an integral structural part of the universe, and that 'we should continue to discover it'. He further states that the act of sacrificing personal interests, so as to help other human beings, is the essence and the deepest nature of natural ethics. The idea of ethics/morality is a constant throughout the entire universe, and it is also present in all the great religions of the world. To be able to make friends out of enemies is an example of the nature of ethics. Nelson Mandela, Ghandi, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu are quoted by Ellis (in the interview) as examples of people who personify the ethic of self-sacrifice, in an attempt to help others. They could have followed the path of hatred, but instead followed the path of positive ethical behaviour. Professor Ellis is, as I'm sure many of us are, fascinated by the fact that a collection of atoms and electrons in the physical universe can somehow come together and co-operate to form an intelligent mind which will in an ethical manner sacrifice self-interest, for the benefit of others. If ethics is indeed a structural part of the greater universe, we as medics, as supposed facilitators of the principles of good clinical practice, should somehow see to it that good ethics is restored and maintained in the profession, at all levels, starting from the top at government level, right down to the humblest foot soldier.

It is to be hoped that Professor Ellis's contribution, as well as his personal example outside of his academic confines, will somehow help and also inspire us all to make sure that ethics maintains its proper position both in our personal and in our professional lives. The medical profession in South Africa is going through very rough seas, at all levels, at the moment and a good objective look at the basics will be necessary from time to time. May we all 'continue to discover'.

J du T Zaaijman

George
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1. Professor George Ellis, interview with journalist Johannes de Villiers. *Die Burger*, 2 April 2004.

A letter from the future

I am writing from my new office in Acornhoek where I have finally opened my new specialist practice. As you know, the certificate of need thing eventually became reality and I was refused permission to continue practising in Johannesburg where I had lived and worked all my life. Initially we had a host of problems. Oh yes, the previous government had given assurances that this would not happen, but the new government had to apply the letter of the law. We tried just about everything. The local Needs Office proved difficult to reach — the phone just rang and rang incessantly for days on end. Eventually we found out that they had this new service from Telkom, it's called Ring-A-Lot. It's not really a telephone, just a number with a device attached that rings without a telephone instrument needing to be attached. The service has been tested in government departments and has proved to be highly effective. After considerable frustration we finally made contact with a really charming and helpful young man at head office. We were convinced that he was a student, but it turned out that he was a learner. Anyway, he had us relocated from Springbok to Acornhoek, and I must say that my services are really required here. I have a specialist in nuclear medicine in the hut next door and he is rushed off his feet. My wife, Helen, is really happy here too. She is working for one of the large pharmaceutical companies in the generic beetroot plantations. They just can't keep up with the demand!

We are expecting two cabinet ministers to be relocated to our village next month. You will agree that there were far too many of them in Pretoria — obviously a legacy of the past. So they have been relocated throughout the land as well! The certificate of needs thing has really worked wonders for the country. Once it was shown to work for the health professions it was applied to absolutely everyone. Sort of spreading resources equally across the board! I was having tea with an advocate friend at his chambers in Kiepersol last week and he informed me that they have just finished relocating car hijackers. It was discovered that there were far too many of them in Johannesburg and Cape Town and that they were desperately needed in Musina and Cookhouse, to name just two of the places not adequately catered for. So the imbalances of the past have finally been redressed, and I am happy to say that the transformation process is just about over.

So it seems that every citizen, no matter who, now has to have a certificate to be in any location depending only on the individual need factor. Everyone, that is, except for the President because he is hardly ever in the country anyway!

With best wishes

Errol