



*Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*

## **NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE**

### **ETHICS, HEALTH AND NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES**

(21st April 2006)

#### *abstract*

The document examines the complex issue of the increasing use of the Internet in the health sector. The NBC recognizes that the exceptional development of information technology can potentially help people to responsibly use science and technology to broaden cultural and formative horizons. Nevertheless, it believes that the freedom of information on the Internet does not consent evasion of the existing rules governing oral, written and televised communication, which were developed by the civil and penal codes in order to protect the dignity and integrity of human beings and law enforcement. In particular, the document focuses attention on the use of an indirect means of communication between the citizen and healthcare workers in the field of clinical medicine, where the “face to face” approach has always been considered a foundational aspect.

The NBC appreciates any process which tends to develop a policy of public health information, disease prevention, and healthy behaviour education; however, it specifies that this information is not always reliable and there is a need for accuracy in health-related messages on the Internet. Therefore, it suggests implementing measures of quality certification based on, both, the voluntary adherence of the message producer to shared codes of practice, and, the recognition by accredited certification agencies of the nature of the message. They must provide, inter alia, the date of completion, the name of the organization and the author. Generally, more stringent regulations should be adopted for the qualification of websites and the identification of those elaborating the message.

According to the members of the NBC, the greatest danger that Internet can create in the health sector is the loss of full communication between doctor and patient, as the relationship tends to be depersonalized due to the significant impoverishment in terms of interpersonal contact. In fact, indirect communication misses out on the crucial set of objective signs (auscultation, palpation, the patient’s general appearance, posture, emotional perception, etc.) which guide the diagnostic process. The opinion calls for an increase in safety standards in the use of the Internet in such a “sensitive” sector as that of health, in order to facilitate the consumer’s selection of useful information and ensure its quality. Therefore, it is recommended that the same deontological rules should apply also to the Internet to protect professional seriousness and dignity; the public authorities and professional associations should be obliged to carry out all the necessary checks.