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VIII Annual Symposium on Biomedicine, Ethics and Society: "Rethinking Informed Consent: The limits of autonomy"

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Balancing autonomy against beneficence

An important element of both the communitarian notion of the common good and the liberal notion of public interest is the advancement of core values of a given society. In Western societies these core values include the ability to pursue individual life-plans and the ability to participate in the life of the community. Health is instrumental in the realization of these core values and this has implications for the provision of health care services. I therefore define necessary health care as effective care needed to restore or maintain both normal individual autonomous and social functioning, the care being more urgent when the disease burden in terms of loss of individual and social functioning is greater. From this it follows that genomic research aiming to develop new or more effective interventions for conditions seriously impairing the autonomous and social functioning of individuals can be said to contribute to the common good. I propose that for research linked with these conditions individual sacrifices are reasonable also when they involve a certain loss of individual control.

When balancing control against community benefits RECs must weigh seemingly incommensurable elements, but I suggest that the loss of control entailed in less-than-ideal consent procedures can be weighed against a likely gain in control of patients whose autonomous and /or social functioning is impaired. I conclude with the formulation of some conditions that should be met before autonomy sacrifices can be reasonably asked..