

Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic from the chair of Korean National Bioethics Committee

The Korean National Bioethics Committee (chaired by Lee Yoon-seong) would like to express its deepest respect and gratitude for the hard work and dedication of the Korean people in overcoming the national crisis incurred by COVID-19. The close cooperation between the central and local governments effectively led by related institutions such as the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters, the unconditional commitment of healthcare workers, and voluntary participation of the public based on the high level of civil awareness created the synergy needed to combat this pandemic.

We have witnessed the limitations of national-level responses to the novel virus that developed into a pandemic in less than six months since the first case was confirmed. Although the crisis was caused by a single disease, it has influenced the care environment, disease control system, and thoughts and cultures of society members of each country; prompted diverse social changes such as “contactless culture”; and gave rise to issues such as unwarranted discrimination and hatred.

The fight against the new infectious disease, for which no safe and verified cure exists, has uncertain future and high risk because it depends on symptomatic therapy with ongoing research. Research projects and countermeasures put into action under such circumstances may occasionally be justified as they stand on special scientific, ethical, and social and cultural foundations different from those employed at normal times. However, such urgent research projects and countermeasures must be pushed ahead only in a highly stringent and selective manner for emergencies or in special situations where there is no other way.

The Korean National Bioethics Committee would like to make several suggestions for the central government, local governments, pharmaceutical and biotech companies, researchers, and the public to consider, in setting the direction to better protect people’s lives and values against future challenges, including pandemics such as COVID-19, based on reflections from a bioethical perspective.

1. The government must be able to show leadership and make decisions in a responsible manner to secure public trust.

Bioethics and safety can be ensured only when public trust is guaranteed. Thus, it is critical to follow basic principles regarding bioethics and safety. If the need for any exceptions arises, the government must be able to provide rational grounds and procedures for such exceptions. All decisions in this process should be made within the scope and limits of clear accountability accompanied by accurate analysis based on professional knowledge.

2. The government must be prepared to cope with the changes and needs of society associated with COVID-19.

In addition to being a physical disease, this pandemic is expected to send a psychological shock as a social and cultural crisis, which can directly affect the mindsets and lifestyles of members of the future society. As such, it is critically needed to remain aware of the reaction and condition of the public, and to consider the pandemic's impact in addition to Covid-19 infection control. In particular, we should be careful not to let the inevitable emergency lead to distrust or disgust in daily life. To this end, an organization consisting of experts from diverse fields, including ethical consultation, can be set up to facilitate decision-making.

3. The government must pay special attention to and provide support for emerging vulnerable groups created by this public healthcare crisis.

While striving to protect the safety and health of all community members through the infection prevention/control system, the central and local governments must remain alert to the reactions and changes of the community, readily identify any underserved or vulnerable groups newly generated by the pandemic, and provide necessary support. Every vulnerable single group should be included in the support through active monitoring in the existing management systems. This also should be applied to healthcare professionals combating the virus.

4. The government and corporations must recognize their public responsibilities and take the lead in the development of vaccines and therapies considering domestic and international situations.

Despite cross-border travel restrictions, it is still difficult to predict when and

where an outbreak will occur, and there are concerns on a second wave of the pandemic. As there is no safe and effective therapies yet, the main focus should be placed on bringing various countries together for the development of treatment options based on global standards. Companies developing Covid-19 therapies must remain aware that they are involved in one of the most critical missions of our time and recognize the importance of cooperation with their international counterparts.

5. The safety of subjects must be prioritized in clinical research.

The government must provide the necessary support for the prompt and effective implementation of research and outcome management. However, any failure to ensure safety and legitimacy will threaten our social order no matter how urgent and important the goal is and may inevitably lead to another source of social anxiety. All clinical research projects should be performed in strict compliance with bioethical standards and based on scientific and ethical reflections on the safety of research subjects.

6. The public must endeavor to ensure the wellbeing of our society by adhering to social distancing and infection prevention measures with a sense of responsibility as community members.

The Korean people have shown remarkable civil awareness as responsible community members against the pandemic, but it still remains essential for the public to understand the traits of the virus and continue to engage in activities to prevent infection. We have often witnessed how insensitivity to safety can lead to an avalanche of tragedy and take a heavy toll on our society. Those who behave in a selfish manner, thinking “I will be the exception” can put the entire community in danger. It is time to consider the wellbeing of the community as top priority and behave with a sense of solidarity to avoid inflicting damage on others. The government should promote civil awareness, encourage and praise voluntary participation, and sternly punish acts that compromise the mutual confidence and social order of the community to protect the safety of the public and enable all community members to benefit from the achievements we have made together.

This crisis will pass. However, it can leave different traces on our society in the future depending on the choices we make in the present. Although it is a social disaster that has exacted a terrible number of patients and deaths, the crisis can be transformed into an opportunity when we soberly review and assess our systems and outcomes to make better choices for the wellbeing of our society in the face of future challenges and to achieve continued progress based on the lessons learned.

Chair of Korean National Bioethics Committee, Lee Yoon-seong