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Abuse of Genetics in Nazi Germany

To the Editor:

Dr. Harper (1992) discusses the abuse of genetics in the first decades of this century in the United States and particularly in Germany, using Huntington disease as an example. Although there are some early reports (e.g., Platen-Hallermund 1948), it is true that after 1945 it took many years until the involvement of scientists and health officials in compulsory sterilization and killing of psychiatric and other patients in Nazi Germany was analyzed in detail. Harper, however,

gives the impression that the denial of the contribution of scientists in the Nazi crimes continued until recently in Germany. This impression deserves some commentary.

During the past decades an immense German literature came out in which many aspects of this outrageous part of German history were analyzed. Some major publications should be mentioned in this context. The historians Zmarzlik (1963) and Wehler (1974) thoroughly examined the aims of social Darwinism in the first decades of this century in Germany, as well as its influence on later history. An early and detailed analysis of eugenics was published by Conrad-Martius (1955). The late professor of history of medicine at the University of Mainz, Mann (1973) initiated a long-standing project on the biological ideas in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a prehistory necessary for the understanding of the later development. Under his guidance a whole series of doctoral theses on biographies of men who became key figures for Nazi ideology and on other central topics were published. The psychoanalyst Mitscherlich and the young physician Mielke gave a detailed report of the trials against the medical doctors who were involved in experimentation in humans, originally written in 1948 for the West German physicians' association (Mitscherlich and Mielke 1960). The psychiatrist Schmidt (1965) gave a frightening account on the "selection" in a psychiatric hospital, and the psychiatrist Dörner (1967) wrote an early review on the killing of patients in Nazi Germany. Nowak (1980), an East German theologian, gave a detailed analysis of euthanasia and sterilization in the Third Reich, focusing on the role of the Protestant and Catholic Churches. Klee (1983), Schmuhl (1987), and Weingart et al. (1988) published excellent books on the history of "racial hygiene" (the German term for eugenics) and "euthanasia" in Nazi Germany, including the history before 1933. In my own textbook on psychiatric genetics I devoted 34 of 368 pages to historical aspects (Proping 1989). This became possible for me only because a vast literature existed already on this topic.

There are still gaps to fill in the history of the abuse of genetics during the Nazi period. On the basis of biographies of the involved doctors and scientists, their intentions, their hopes, and their fears, we have to understand why and how they became guilty. Nevertheless, some general conclusions appear already warranted: The combination of a poor understanding of population genetics; the old and widespread fear of degeneration, in view of the loss of millions of young

people during World War I; a desperate economic situation; and a totalitarian system that had started another terrible war—all made the smooth, stepwise progression from eugenic theory to compulsory sterilization and, finally, to the killing of mentally ill patients possible. As were Hitler and the other political leaders, most of the doctors and scientists involved in the crimes of the Nazi period were convinced that society had to be cleaned from “bad” genes and even from the affected individuals. In the interest of a “stronger” and “healthier” race, they regarded the unbelievable cruelties against helpless patients as acceptable or even necessary. They would undoubtedly have welcomed the technical possibilities of present-day genetics. Otherwise, most of them were rather “normal” people, or even good scientists. This is alarming, even for a democratic society.

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Minimum Qualifications for Directors: DNA-based Genetic-testing Laboratories

To the Editor:

In the Spring of 1989, the DNA Testing Subcommittee of the Quality Assurance Committee of CORN (Council of Regional Networks for Genetic Services) was formed. Representatives of the 10 U.S. regions, as defined by the Genetic Disease Branch of Maternal and Child Health, were appointed by their local DNA-testing committees. To date, this subcommittee has accomplished the following: (1) a nationwide listing of truly clinical DNA-testing laboratories (*Survey of Clinical DNA Diagnostic Laboratories 1990, 1991*); (2) oversight of two nationwide interlaboratory comparison programs, one in 1989 (20 laboratories) and one currently in progress (70 laboratories); and (3) development of minimum laboratory-director qualifications for genetic-testing labs. A description of the latter is the topic of this correspondence.

The subcommittee began its task by surveying all laboratory directors identified in its nationwide survey, to determine their training and experience. On the basis of these data, the committee composed a draft document. This was sent out for comments in April 1991, to these same individuals. The period for written comments ended in October 1991. The final recommendations (as voted on and approved by the subcommittee) are presented in the Appendix.

It must be stressed that the DNA-testing subcommittee felt that there was an urgent need for definition of minimum qualifications for directors in laboratories offering genetic testing. They have chosen to leave the areas of nongenetic applications of the DNA-based technology to other groups, e.g., The Working Group on DNA Analysis Methods (TWGDAM), which has established criteria for forensic-DNA-laboratory directors (*Guidelines for a Quality Assurance Program for DNA Analysis 1991*). It is the sincere hope of the DNA testing subcommittee that persons in a position