Preventing two procedures of genetic engineering: germ-line interventions and human reproductive cloning. In these two technologies the identity of the human species is at stake. Germ-line interventions would have irreversible effects on future generations and could be used for eugenic purposes. Human cloning would be a radical form of instrumentalization of people, making them “copies” produced to meet other peoples wants rather than “originals”. International efforts are focusing on new common standards that take into account the interests not only of people alive now but of future generations.

HIV/AIDS and human rights (pp. 964–969)

People who are marginalized, stigmatized and discriminated against tend also to be those most at risk of HIV infection. The “rights-based approach” to public health thus represents both a value in itself and a means of promoting effective policies. Human rights conventions, in contrast to the World Trade Organization, have no mechanism to impose penalties for violations of their rules, but they are an important factor in aid policy, and in building participatory control programmes within countries. In April 2001, 39 pharmaceutical companies bowed to worldwide condemnation by abandoning court action against the South African government over legislation that could be used to make essential drugs affordable for millions of South Africans. In this case, arguments supporting the government were based in large part on international human rights law and obligations.

Controlling environmental health risks (pp. 970–974)


International environmental law can help to galvanize action in favour of public health. The Stockholm Convention, for example, has been hailed as a “global public health treaty” and “the first global agreement ever to seek to ban an entire class of chemicals because of their direct effects on human health”. It was finalized in 2001 and is expected to enter into force in 2004 after ratification by 50 countries.

Coordinating international lawmakers (pp. 975–980)

With many organizations sharing lawmaking authority over health-related issues, efforts to impose order can easily be fragmented and ineffective. Issue linkage, a study area which defines the relation between the different subjects of international law, can help to avert this danger. International health law is increasingly recognized as central to other legal realms such as human rights, environmental law, international labour law, and arms control. Health thus becomes a rallying-point for multilateralism. The expansion of international trade, for instance, affects medicines, food security, nutrition, infectious disease control, and biotechnology. Health is likewise closely linked to international peace and security issues such as biological and other weapons systems.

Leadership in coordinating the codification and implementation of health-related law is needed. WHO is well placed by its mandate and visibility to provide it. Though it has no binding authority over the other activities of autonomous intergovernmental organizations, it can play a pivotal role in setting the international health law agenda and coordinating action.

Classic: the highest attainable standard of health (pp. 981–982)

The Preamble to WHO’s Constitution offers health workers a purpose, a challenge, and an obligation.

Books: genomics (pp. 985–986)

Should market forces guide the world’s research agenda and the demand for more competitive, attractive and cost-effective humans?