

Prelude
Reflections on the International Ethics
Conference in December, 2009

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Author's Note

The opinions presented in this text are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or positions of the University of Botswana (UB). The conference was supported financially and in-kind by the following organizations in alphabetical order: Botswana Medical Aid Society (BOMAID), Botswana Motor Vehicle Accident Fund (MVA), Botswana Public Officers Medical Aid Society (BPOMAS), Embassy of the United States, Standard Chartered Bank Botswana, University of Botswana, and Wellcome Trust (United Kingdom). With the University of Botswana as the sponsor, the conference was partnered with two United States government organizations, Navy Medicine and the Graduate School of Nursing at the Uniformed Services University.

Abstract

This prelude reflects upon the international ethics conference that was held from December 6-9, 2009, at the University of Botswana in Gaborone, Botswana. Seeking international partners and then forging mutually viable and effectively working links with them is the life blood of a university in a developing country. This partnering is necessary largely because a university in a developing country often lacks resources and affirmation. The resources it lacks range from intellectual capital to funding for its scholarly endeavors. This paper demonstrates how the University of Botswana, as an example of a university in a developing country, has reached out to join hands with a resource-endowed community in the western world through putting up a world class and modern international conference on ethics, one of the most topical concerns in academia.

Keywords: Ethics, globalization, engagement, human dignity, health care.

Summary

Any event that is held by an academic institution has a purpose. This paper explains the context within which the conference was held, its significance, and how it will shape the University of Botswana as it moves forward.

While a conference has objectives, there are always people behind it who initiate the idea and determine how that idea will be implemented. The usual practice is to deal with this matter at the institutional level, emphasizing institutional activities. However, in this particular case, it is difficult to follow that route because the main actor, Professor Edward Gabriele, represents a number of institutions: the Society for Research Administrators International (SRA), US Navy Medicine, and the US Uniformed Services University Graduate School of Nursing. It was through his work in them all that he took the opportunity to engage members of the University of Botswana in holding this first-ever conference in Botswana. In particular, in his capacity as the Editor of the Journal of Research Administration, Professor Gabriele worked with Professor Isaac N. Mazonde and Dr. Jose Jackson-Malete and helped them publish, with Dr. Jeremy Sugarman, an article on ethics (Mazonde, Malete, & Sugarman, 2007). The bond grew and a relationship was forged, resulting in the conference and in the research collaboration that the two parties are now vigorously pursuing between the University of Botswana on the one side and many colleagues around the world on the other.

In its strategic plan, officially known as A Strategy for Excellence, the University of Botswana lists several priority areas in which it will engage. The two most applicable to the matter at hand are Engagement and Improving Research Performance. Essentially, Engagement is about reaching out to real and potential stakeholders, as in forging links between the university and industry. Engagement can also refer to international collaboration in research. Improving Research Performance is by and large self explanatory.

The world class conference on healthcare ethics held at the University of Botswana from December 6-9, 2009 addressed these two priorities in a resounding manner. That global event, a joint collaboration among the University of Botswana, US Navy Medicine, and the US Uniformed Services University Graduate School of Nursing, was graced by two prominent men of international stature. These were His Grace, the Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, a renowned Anglican Church cleric and an accomplished anti-apartheid activist; and Vice Admiral Adam Robinson, the US Navy Surgeon General. Simply put, a major goal of US Navy Medicine is to reach out to victims of natural disasters and hazards, such as floods or earthquakes or tsunamis, wherever they occur. The international conference was therefore a meeting point that addressed the goals of both the University of Botswana and US Navy Medicine.

The theme of the conference was *Retrieving the Human Face of Science: Understanding Ethics and Integrity in Healthcare, Medicine and Research*. Essentially, this was an educational conference whose stated goal was to bring together practitioners from Botswana and experts in health care, medicine, and research from around the world to discuss issues of integrity and ethics related to these professions. Government officials, military officers, and health industry leaders came together over the three-day conference.

In his welcome remarks, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana, Prof Bojosi Otlhogile, highlighted the core theme of the conference through his observation that “Medical science has led to advancements in knowledge and improvements in health and human life. Yet each day, practitioners in the areas of health care, medicine, and research confront difficult questions that need responses as they seek to conduct themselves in ways that are expected by society.” He continued, “I have no doubt that this conference will add to the overall quality of life of Botswana and Southern Africa.” Botswana* expect that research will be conducted as a public good with the broad aim of raising the quality of life. The country’s leaders look to researchers for the development of innovative ways to face the threats of malaria, cholera, tuberculosis, and various other infectious diseases.

The human element in healthcare delivery, the second major aspect of the theme of the conference, was emphasized by Archbishop Tutu in his presentation of human illness and the fragility of life. In this context, he acknowledged the tremendous global health care challenges facing practitioners but reminded all present not to forget that, above all else, sick people are human beings. “We must remember that people are more than a physical body or a biological machine. We must remember that the people in front of you seeking medical care are complex individuals with a bundle of emotions,” said Tutu.

In a manner that clearly put in high relief the global mission of US Navy Medicine, Vice Admiral Adam Robinson’s keynote address underscored the critical need for global partnerships aimed at meeting common challenges. Articulating this need, Vice Admiral Robinson observed, “In this uncertain world, the United States and other nations have continued to forge greater bonds of trust and cooperation with people and countries around the world to contribute to the common good.” He continued, “It is a common good symbolized by this medical convention, a first of its kind here in Botswana, a truly remarkable gathering of government officials, military officers, and industry leaders to discuss health care issues that we all must meet head on.”

The conference had great significance and direct benefit for the University of Botswana because it addressed the role of science and diplomacy, and discussed opportunities to integrate ethics and integrity into institutional and national policies and programs. A major outcome of the conference was the development of future discussions that will take place between the University of Botswana and various international colleagues, including those from US Navy Medicine, regarding which diverse organizations can collaborate for mutual development and growth.

The national importance of this entire endeavor was articulated by His Excellency, Stephen Nolan, the US Ambassador to Botswana, when he said, “This conference will go a long way to bolstering our already strong relationship with the people of Botswana. It was significant for the University of Botswana to host such a major gathering that brought together so many leading practitioners and thinkers about ethics in health, medicine, and research. The conference put the University on the map and also highlighted the important role played by US Navy Medicine.”

A few organizations contributed to the success of the conference by making donations. These included Botswana Medical Aid Society (BOMAID), Botswana Public Officers Medical Aid Scheme (BPOMAS), Embassy of the United States, Botswana Motor

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** The term "Batswana" refers to the citizens of the nation of Botswana.*

References

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