

Postlude

After the International Ethics Conference, What is Next?

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Author's Note

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Abstract

In this text, Paul Ndebele, a member of the Ethics Conference Organizing Committee, provides a summary of the conference and its achievements, and the way forward after the International Ethics Conference.

Introduction

The International Ethics Conference held at the University of Botswana from 6-10 December 2009 brought together over 250 delegates, speakers, and other participants from a wide range of disciplines. The theme of the conference, *Retrieving the Human Face of Science: Understanding Ethics and Integrity in Healthcare, Medicine and Research*, was topical for the delegates, who were a blend of healthcare professionals, academicians, lawyers, health policy makers, theologians, researchers, media professionals, retired professionals, medical and nursing students, and, interestingly, laypersons who attended both as consumers of medical services and as potential research participants. Though health professionals and researchers represented the majority, the mix clearly reflected the growing interest in bioethics amongst people of all social backgrounds, and an increase in the magnitude and momentum of the bioethics movement globally and in Botswana specifically.

Summary of the Conference

The conference began on Sunday, December 6, 2009 with four pre-conference workshops held in two parallel sessions in the morning and afternoon. The pre-conference workshops were facilitated by teams of local and international experts, and provided a platform for the discussion of important questions in the area of international research. The workshops also provided guidance on preparing proposals to meet the ethical requirements of review boards. The sessions were very useful for young and up-coming researchers, and stimulated debates and discussions around the issue of post-trial access.

The workshops were followed by a Braai in the Mokolodi Nature Reserve—an experience that was aimed at showcasing Botswana’s natural gifts whilst at the same time serving as a stimulant for networking. The conference itself ran from December 7-9, 2009 and offered a blend of absorbing and interesting plenary sessions and panel discussions. The keynote speakers, presenters, and panelists represented various disciplines ranging from health research, research administration, health policy, and public health.

The conference included three keynote addresses covering various aspects related to each of the three main areas of focus—healthcare, medicine, and research. Each of the three keynotes was followed by comments from respondents who had expertise in the topics presented by the keynote presenters.

The first keynote was given by His Grace Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a man held in high esteem both locally and internationally. The Archbishop is a man of natural talent; in his moving keynote he called for a shift of view from the patient as a “case” to a fellow human being in need of service. The Archbishop emphasized that all human beings become vulnerable during times of illness, as illness brings them closer to death. During this time of vulnerability, humans require fellow human beings to provide them care and support. He called for a more holistic view and respect of the patient as the centre of the healthcare enterprise. He added that ethical issues and their nuances must be debated not merely by doctors but all of civil society.

Vice Admiral Adam Robinson, the second keynote speaker, gave a moving address on the need for compassion in the delivery of healthcare, medicine, and research. He illustrated his ideas ably using examples from the US Navy and the role that it plays in assisting victims of natural disasters. In his talk on *Hearing the Cries of the Poor: Healthcare as Human Response*, the United States Navy Surgeon General emphasised the need for those who have resources to assist the less privileged in times of need. His discussion naturally flowed from Archbishop Tutu’s keynote, as he illustrated how the privileged can assist the less privileged.

The third keynote which was given by Dr. Joseph Makhema, Director of the Botswana-Harvard partnership, who emphasized the important issues that arise in international collaborative research. Dr. Makhema has considerable experience in this field and ably used his own experiences in his keynote address titled *Globalization and the Diplomacy of Science*. Dr. Makhema stressed that dialogue was necessary to ensure that research addressed the needs of host countries.

Three separate lectures focused on complementing the keynote addresses. Dr. Elizabeth Holmes from the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership, United States Naval Academy, gave the first lecture on *Character, Leadership and the Healthcare Professions*. This lecture highlighted the importance of training healthcare professionals to become leaders of character. The second lecture, *The Tradition of Mentoring*, was given by Dr. Wayman Cheatham and Dr. Edward Gabriele, both from United States Navy Medicine. The lecture highlighted the importance of mentoring in the process of creating professionals. The third lecture focused on the integrity of research and was delivered by Dr. Linnea Axman from United States Navy Medicine and Dr. Denise Boren from California State University. It focused on the various strategies that can be used in promoting professionalism in research. All three lectures were followed by panel discussions. The panelists included experts with extensive experience related to the topics under discussion.

The Way Forward

The conference provided a platform for sharing views, research findings, and expertise on a wide variety of ethical issues inherent in clinical care, public health, research in healthcare, and health policy. The deliberations successfully sensitized participants to the spectrum of ethical issues inherent in healthcare, medicine, and research. The sessions also enabled the participants to acquire skills to recognize ethical dilemmas and constructively deal with them.

The discussions were greatly enriched by the variety of disciplines represented. The conference also served as an important forum for networking that will no doubt yield new collaborations, including staff and student exchanges, collaborative grant writing, future conferences, workshops, and other opportunities. The participants who represented their institutions brought with them a wealth of experience and expertise. The new collaborations that emerged from this sharing of ideas and skills enabled the participants to take back new knowledge to their respective institutions. This dissemination of new ideas ensures that the benefit is shared, and that a “re-inventing of the wheel” is avoided.

Throughout the conference, one message came out clearly: whilst medicine, healthcare and research have played an important role in prolonging life to unexpected lengths, checks and balances are needed to ensure that humankind is well served. Concerns were also expressed regarding justice issues in international collaborative research and unjust health care policies and medical practices that are not patient-focused.

It was also clear that academic and training institutions, such as the University of Botswana, need to serve as a national focal point by initiating dialogue on improving professional practice by researchers and healthcare workers. Policy makers and practitioners must be guided by ethical principles in the development and implementation of policies that address research, healthcare, and medicine. On an individual level, it became very evident that ethics has an important influence on life decisions, and there is a need to provide space for ethical discourse in academic, public, and professional arenas. An ethics knowledge gap was identified among researchers and professionals and policy makers. This gap needs to be bridged so that individuals are empowered to make ethical decisions in alignment with their values and beliefs. One delegate summarized all this in one statement: “Ethics is about human beings living as humans.”

Postlude

An important contribution of the conference was the dialogue initiated on bioethics education and the subject of mentoring as a key component in the training of professionals so that they can integrate ethical perspectives into their work. There is a need to sensitize health professionals and researchers to their respective roles in responsible communication of medical issues to the public and reporting on scientific research. In the future, focused training courses should be held for professionals working in the various areas of healthcare, medicine, and research, as each area has unique ethical issues.

The media also has an important role to play in framing ethical issues and the responses of the public, patients, and other parties. Future workshops, seminars, and conferences should continue to ensure that discussions and debates continue. Practitioners from developing countries should be a part of the development process for professional codes guiding any discipline. This activity would support Ubuntu's belief that we all need to make a meaningful contribution towards the advancement of human society. Ethical principles are embedded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, and the Ethics Conference provided practitioners, based in Botswana and other African countries, an opportunity for a focused discussion on how Ubuntu can be incorporated into medicine, healthcare, and research so they can all continue to serve society.

As the University of Botswana seeks to become a research-intensive university, there will always be the need to look back and check if the research enterprise has a "human face." In the training of various cadres of health professionals, there will always be the need to ensure that these individuals are trained in such a way that they can highlight the human face of healthcare, medicine, and research. As one of the main producers of health professionals and policy makers, the University of Botswana has to focus on the bigger picture by addressing the question: What role can the University play in ensuring and promoting ethical practices in medicine, healthcare and research?

The conference has served as an important milestone that will ensure that training and research programmes at the University of Botswana are designed to serve society. In terms of possibilities of future collaboration, the conference serves as an important starting point, as it has served successfully in creating both local and international networks.