

# Epilogue

## The International Ethics Conference: An Eye Opener

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### Abstract

In this text, Ellemes Phuma, shares her experience and the benefits she derived from the International Ethics Conference held at the University of Botswana (UB). As a graduate student in nursing at that university, she provides her perspective on professional responsibility, compassionate healthcare, and the ethical role that healthcare professionals assume when dealing with vulnerable patients

### Introduction

The Ethics Conference held at the University of Botswana was the first Medical Ethics Conference I have attended. The conference, which was themed *Retrieving the Human Face of Science: Understanding Ethics and Integrity in Healthcare, Medicine and Research*, took place at the University of Botswana Library Auditorium from 6-10th December 2009. It attracted an audience of professionals from different disciplines, as well as students from Environmental Science, Nursing, Medicine, and Social Work. As one of the students who attended the conference, I was offered an opportunity to learn more about ethics in the area of healthcare and research.

### Conference Overview

The conference, which started with a pre-conference workshop in parallel sessions on 6th December, had delegates from different countries. Some individuals who were not directly related to healthcare, medicine and research, were also in attendance. Presentations and discussions during the two pre-conference sessions I attended provided an insight regarding the importance of following appropriate ethical procedures when developing proposals in healthcare research and clinical trials.

On the first day of the conference, it was so impressive to see Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu giving the opening keynote address. Archbishop Tutu is well known in Africa for his contribution to the fight against apartheid in South Africa and remains an important international figure due to his international involvement. In his address, *Human Illness and the Experience of Vulnerability*, he pointed out that human beings have emotions and psychological needs; when ill, they become vulnerable, requiring the caring hand of other human beings.

## Epilogues

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His presentation caused us, as healthcare providers, to reflect on our actions and interactions with consumers of healthcare services. I realized that in most cases we providers take a superior role over our patients, addressing them by the conditions they are suffering from rather than as individuals. We tend to forget that as “human beings, we are also vulnerable,” and at some time in our lives will also need care and comfort from others. It was from this perspective that I discovered that, as a student in the healthcare profession, I have a duty to improve my perceptions and attitudes towards healthcare consumers and be counted among the most respectful health professionals who live and work for others.

The keynote by Archbishop Tutu was followed by a second keynote address given by the US Navy Surgeon General, Vice Admiral Adam Robinson. In his address, *Hearing the Cries of the Poor: Healthcare as Human Response*, Vice Admiral Robinson gave examples of the various engagements by the US Navy in assisting individuals and communities in need. It was so interesting to see how the two keynote addresses were related. From this address it was clear that, as healthcare providers, we have the responsibility to respond positively to the needs of people in all settings who are made vulnerable by illness.

The keynote addresses by Archbishop Tutu and Vice Admiral Robinson were complemented by a series of lectures and panel discussions that provided an opportunity for further discussion. Of interest were the presentations on character, leadership, the healthcare profession, and the tradition of mentoring. It was emphasized that, as a noble profession, healthcare is challenging and requires leaders who are competent, confident, and caring. Since the quality of healthcare providers is influenced by the type of mentors encountered, leaders and academics in the healthcare profession should provide exemplary mentorship to students. The discussion reminded me that, as students, we sometimes tend to acquire skills and develop attitudes that will distort the human face. We need to step up and make a difference. Students need to be responsible for developing themselves in a way that will impress their mentors and benefit healthcare consumers.

We also had the opportunity to visit the technology expositions, where different posters displayed some of the interventions that are being used to reduce medical errors in institutions. It was noted that most of the medical errors that patients experience in healthcare institutions result from human factors and negligence. Most of these errors can be avoided if professionals follow standard procedures in healthcare. I realized that, as patient advocates, students and healthcare professionals should strive to ensure safety by reducing medical errors.

## Conclusion

The conference was an eye opener to both experienced professionals and students from different disciplines. It provided delegates an insight into what it takes to become a competent, confident, and caring professional in the challenging healthcare profession. As a student, I learned that patients should not be looked upon as cases and numbers, but treated with respect as fellow human beings who are in need of a helping hand. As a healthcare professional, I realized that there is need to strive towards a service based on compassion, friendship, trust, and, above all, professionalism.

It is high time students in the healthcare profession become assertive in developing themselves as competent, confident, and caring professionals to change the current face of healthcare provision. To achieve this change, students need to acquire from their mentors only those attitudes and skills that will contribute positively to the healthcare profession. I am now not only looking forward to completing my studies, but also to serving my country—as a professional. I hope that all health sciences students at UB and other institutions will have the opportunity to benefit from similar events in the future.