



OTAGO BIOETHICS REPORT

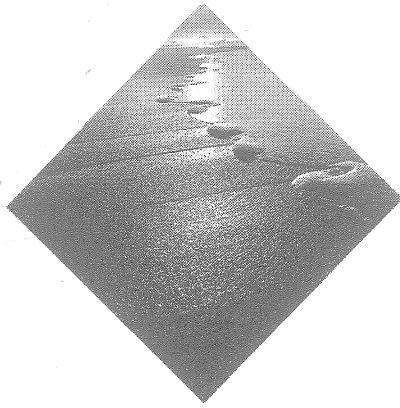
Incorporating Bioethics Research Centre Newsletter

University of Otago
Te Whare Wananga o Otago

Volume 6 Number 1 February 1997

Editorial

John McMillan: Bioethics in an Interdependent World



UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
MEDICAL LIBRARY
GREAT KING ST.,
P.O. BOX 913, DUNEDIN
NEW ZEALAND

IN THIS ISSUE

Physicians for Human Rights	page 3
Case Commentary	page 5
Bioethics on the Internet	page 8
Medical Futility is not a Futile Ethical Principle	page 10

Mid November 1996 Barbara, Lynley, Katherine and I made the long journey to San Francisco for the Third World Congress of Bioethics 'Bioethics in an Interdependent World'.

We arrived at the Crowne Pacific Parc Plaza in a sleep-deprived state and began the process of adapting to San Francisco. One alarming feature of San Francisco is that in mid-November it is warmer than Dunedin at the same time of the year. We were all surprised when it started to get dark at five pm on such a warm 'summer's day'.

For bioethics, the event was huge with the Congress really being six conferences in one.

During the first three days (20-22 November), the American Association of Bioethics held its annual meeting. For us this session was a great opportunity to meet some of the bioethicists we knew well from their writings in the Hastings Center Report and other international journals. Dan Brock, Dan Wikler and Alexander Capron were just a couple of the bioethics high-fliers in attendance. One of the more interesting sessions of this meeting was on the ethics of managed care. There are big concerns in the USA about the potential dangers of insurance companies being involved with decisions about the type of health services that are delivered.

George Annas and Arthur Caplan led a very interesting session on Bioethicists and University Scandals. The discussion centred around the sticky situation that a bioethicist falls into when medical colleagues become

the centre of a scandal. The conflict that they experience between speaking out for what they think is right and being a good team player made for an interesting session.

For me the highlight of the AAB conference was the Friday morning session on Medical Science Under State Control. Alexander Capron gave an introduction to this session which pointed out the significance of its timing, fifty years after the ten principles comprising the Nuremburg Code were released. As well as being an appropriate time for commemorating the victims of the Nazi doctors, it also provided an opportunity to consider the judgement at Nuremburg in the light of unethical state-controlled research in other countries.

Yuan Fang Chen gave a powerful presentation entitled 'Japanese Death Factories in China and the American Cover-Up'. She outlined some of the horrific experiments that were carried out during World War II. Most of the experiments were carried out to further the knowledge of the Japanese military into germ and chemical warfare. She argued that the US military, eager to gain information from the Japanese programme, assisted in keeping news about the research as quiet as possible.

Vadim Jacovlevich Birstein, who works at the Institute for the Biology of Development in Moscow, made the first international presentation on atrocities committed by Soviet doctors. One of the thoughts evoked by these presentations was that this sort of experimentation is not peculiar to one nation, but has occurred many

times when nations are seeking a military edge.

There was a good-sized New Zealand contingent at the Congress. Alastair Campbell (who is more of an honorary New Zealander these days) chaired sessions on the place of religion in bioethics and Allocating Resources: from the Bureau of Health to the Bedside. It was great, both at personal and professional levels, to see Alastair again. It was a meeting that was tinged with some sadness though. When Alastair left for Bristol we knew that we would be seeing him at this conference; saying good bye at San Francisco seemed now more final.

As well as a forum for meeting bioethicists from other parts of the world, the conference was a good opportunity to get to know some other New Zealanders better. Alison Douglass and Michael McCabe are both on the Central Regional Health Authority's ethics committee (Alison is the chair). They presented a paper 'Ethical Issues in Research with Vulnerable Populations' during the Friday session. Their presentation began with a waiata led by Regina Peritini.

Katherine Hall, Lynley Anderson and I, were speaking at the same time, so we couldn't get to hear each other talk. The papers we presented were 'Intensive Care Ethics in Evolution', 'Knowledge and Power in the Clinical setting' and 'Consent as Empowerment'.

FAB

One of the Post-Congress Symposia was the First International Conference on Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (FAB). This was held over two days and included such sessions as: reproduction, race and class; gender, consent and control; feminism, disability and genetics; women's health issues in emerging economies; and reflections on autonomy, agency and resistance. The FAB conference covered issues to do with gender and health care, and women's health issues such as access of women to health care, and reproductive choices. Theoretical issues to do with justice and health care were also discussed. As well as this, the conference examined wider issues such as the interaction of gender with disability, race, and class; these were much more visible in the FAB confer-

ence than at the preceding main conferences.

Barbara Nicholas was chair of a session on Reconstructing Bioethics: Centring the Marginalised where she also presented a paper on Strategies for Effective Transformation. Just a few of the other notable speakers that presented at the FAB conference were Anne Donchin, Susan Sherwin, Rosemary Tong, Laura Purdy, and Mary Mahowald.

HUGO Day

Another Post-Congress Symposium was 'Studying Human Genetic Diversity: Can We Do It Right?' The session began with an introduction to what the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) is, where it is at and where it is going.

Then there were three panel discussions, each panel focussing on a different perspective of the HGDP. The panels were comprised of ethicists working on the HGDP's ethics committee, anthropologists and other social scientists, and representatives from indigenous peoples. Because of the session's structure, the vast differences between these perspectives was brought out. The ethicists associated with the project assured the audience that there were no problems with it. They argued that concerns that the project would result in racism if differences were found between racial groups were not based on a thorough understanding of the facts. Their major argument was that because there exists more genetic diversity between the members of any one ancestral group than exists across these groups, the diversity experiment would in fact help to eliminate racism. Thus the ethicists answer to the question of whether the HGDP should go ahead was a definite 'yes'.

The panel of social scientists took a more critical approach to the HGDP. In particular, they raised concerns about the way that those working on the HGDP were going about the business of collecting samples. Their answer to whether the project ought to go ahead was more of 'maybe, if you do things properly'.

The most powerful presentations came from the panel of representatives from indigenous groups targeted by the Diversity project. As the

project is about testing the amount of diversity in the human genome, it has targeted indigenous peoples for genetic sampling. The dubious aspects of the project in combination with the history of these colonised groups, meant that they want nothing to do with the diversity project. Regina Peritini spoke powerfully against the HGDP on behalf of the Tangata Whenua of Aotearoa. As indigenous groups are the people most affected by the HGDP, I was left wondering how this project could have an unproblematic future.

San Francisco has, like most big American cities, a large number of homeless people. Coming from Aotearoa this was one of the city's most striking features. The stark contrast between the lifestyle of those living on the street, just outside the doors of the conference hotel and the plush interior where we were involved in learned discussions on ethics created a sense of irony that was difficult to shake.

It is impossible to convey the full range of papers, presentations and personalities of the Third World Congress. Suffice it to say that all of the Centre staff who went to San Francisco have returned filled with new ideas and inspiration.

John McMillan
Assistant Lecturer

Become a
Friend of the Centre
and receive the
Otago Bioethics Report
(three issues per year).

Individual (\$25)

Institutional (\$30)

Student (\$15)

Overseas (NZ \$35)

Please make your cheque
payable to the Bioethics Centre,
PO Box 913, Dunedin.