

Bioethics in Asia – Integrating Cultural Issues into Medical Ethics. A workshop at the Fifth World Congress of Bioethics, Ethics, Law and Policy

London, 22 September 2000

This workshop was part of the Fifth World Congress of Bioethics, organized by the International Association for Bioethics (IAB). It brought together voices of Bioethics from countries in Asia, with a forum at one of the world's biggest events in Bioethics. In 9 presentations, speakers from 7 countries addressed burning ethical issues, including brain dead, organ transplantation, research ethics, education, and health care reform, and others, with a special focus on the cultural and social dimensions in the respective regions. About 50 scholars attended, the majority coming from Asian countries.

This workshop was initiated and organized by Ole Döring (Institute of Asian Affairs, Hamburg), and supported by the Congress president, Alastair Campbell (University of Bristol). The conceptual framework rooted in an ongoing research project, conducted by the author, and sponsored by the Dr. Helmut Storz Foundation since 1996.

Although Asia has an "Asian Bioethics Association", with the *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* as its official journal (<http://www.biol.tsukuba.ac.jp/~macer/EJAIB.html>), and though the 4th IAB World Congress 1998 had taken place in Tokyo, Asian Bioethics is not very visible, and a somewhat coordinated supply to international Bioethics from Asian scholars still is out of sight. In this regard, the workshop had the main purpose of introducing the diversified state of the art of Bioethics in Asia to an interested international audience, confirming the advanced level of scholarship and the ethical significance of research. Politically, it was a calling for more understanding and engagement of mainstream Bioethics for the ethical situation in Asia and in developing countries around the globe. In contrast to the relatively small time-slot available during the Congress, the high profile of this workshop was symbolized by the distinguished chairpersons, all of whom being active or former IAB board members (Qiu Renzong, China; Hyakudai Sakamoto, Japan; Leonardo deCastro, The Philippines; and Hasna Begum, Bangladesh).

The participants had begun to work for this event virtually before the Congress. The abstracts and most of the papers had been circulated via internet, allowing participants to prepare and reshape their presentations in the light of the colleagues' contribution. With the help from all speakers and chairpersons the discussion ran smoothly. Most of all, the foreseeable communication problems (English as the *lingua franca* in Bioethics is not the mother tongue of most Asians) did not inhibit the exchange of thoughts.

The topics embraced a wide range. Meta-ethical reflections on the rationality of Bioethics (Allan Alvarez, The Philippines), culture-sociological and ethical discussions of the meaning of life and death in a multicultural setting (Nurani Mohd Nor, Malaysia), and a critical account of the disturbing reality of brain-death and organ-donation in Japan (Kenzo Hamano) were debated, as well as studies on moral and ethical concerns of focus groups in China (Wang Yanguang) and Japan (Emiko

Konoshi and Anne Davies), and new approaches to education in Bioethics (Josephine Wong, Hong Kong). The unethical, "raping" style of biomedical research of Western companies in Asian countries was made evident (Peter Sy, The Philippines), and a critical report about the transforming Chinese health care system from an ethical perspective was given (Zhai Xiaomei, China). Altogether, the debate combined theoretical concepts with empirical facts and contextual application, proving that ethics as a practical discipline must deal with reality, and that Asian bioethicists do have an alert appreciation of this understanding of ethics. This workshop made a strong example of how Bioethics could benefit from a more thorough integration of cultural issues (Ole Döring, Germany).

A culturally conscious and interested approach to medicine is an immediate demand, both in terms of ethics and prudence. Cultural issues have been largely neglected by mainstream Bioethics. Marginalization of culture is not just a problem of injustice and discrimination. Much more than this, it ignores a rich "natural pool" of existing practices and concepts of ethical understanding that might help to progress in mutual learning and moral practice. Examples from Asia make it evident that culture is neither static nor does it have intrinsic value. Outright immoral practices, such as clitoral circumcision, or feet-binding, undoubtedly belong to the cultures of mankind, just as music, calligraphy and rules of civilized conduct have their place. Culture should be understood as a process of transformation. In its products, culture is always a preliminary outcome of mankind's struggles to express itself, and to create whatever is believed to be necessary, beautiful, good or right.

Culture is less about what we are now, and even much more less about how we have been. It is, first of all, about how we want to become. How we want to become in medicine from the perspective of ethics, is a question with such great a potential impact on the sustainability of the ongoing development of our planet, including plain survival of humankind, social peace and fairness, and life with dignity, that we can only profit from becoming systematically engaged in a new assessment of cultural issues. The minimum it will bring us is more reality and less secondary approaches in medical ethics.

Bioethics from Asia also deserves efficient and appropriate representation among the international academic Bioethics bodies, such as the IAB. This engagement would be no one-way-street, but it would be designed to enhance the level of practical understanding of real life problems in international Bioethics discourses, thereby resisting tendencies toward a "Bioethics for the rich".

Ole Döring