



Morning Discussion Session Summary

Conference participants were invited to discuss the following questions in small groups at their table. Each table designated someone to take notes of their discussion, which were collected at the end of the session and summarized here.

Please note that these are the views of conference participants and not necessarily those of the Provincial Health Ethics Network.

What are the most significant ethical issues facing the biosphere today?

Allocation of Scarce Resources

- Threat to universal health care
- Commercialization of health through emphasis on profit and efficiency
- Just distribution of health care services and other social resources
- Discrepancy between urban vs. rural access to health care
- Availability of appropriate medication
- Allocating resources to medical interventions vs. social interventions

Environmental Issues

- Global warming
- Environmental degradation that influences health issues and health outcomes
- Inequitable distribution of resources (water, food and energy)
- Water-privatization
- Apathy towards pollution for the sake of convenience
- Unsafe food supply and distribution

Global Issues

- Inequities between “have countries” and “have not countries”. How do we ethically defend having all these resources and not sharing them?
- The debt of impoverished countries to wealthy countries.
- The wealthy and powerful countries make decisions for the rest of the world
- Globalization of social norms
- AIDS and other illnesses
- War and conflict
- Over population

Health Care System

- Tension between ethics and the law- i.e. ethical decisions are not always legal

- Harm being done despite good interventions- e.g. deception, lying, decisions made without informed consent of patients
- Moral distress among healthcare workers
- Working with culturally diverse populations
- Tension between respect for patient autonomy and paternalism
- Balancing work and personal life with respect to values and character
- Ethical issues at the end of life
- Genetic engineering, cloning
- Lack of corporate ethics among tobacco and pharmaceutical companies

Has the field of health ethics addressed these issues? Please explain.

- Ethics has not always been visible and easily accessible to everyone
- Must translate discussion about issues into action - must translate an organization's mission into action
- Recent literature has begun to address the topic of lying, but this only reaches a small audience
- Health professionals are in denial about the significant influence of pharmaceutical companies
- Ethics are not applied globally
- We are often constrained by politics- for example, supply and demand of drugs and anti-flu vaccines
- Poverty issues have not been adequately addressed; when they are addressed, they often are inadequate and perhaps detrimental because we try to use science and technology to solve problems when these issues are better served with more grassroots programs
- Medical school is starting to address ethics and value formation
- Truth-telling (i.e. in media) needs to be more widespread

Is there a need for health ethics to change or expand its focus? If so, in what ways, and how can this be achieved?

Advocacy

- Increase advocacy among the public and like-minded individuals already involved in ethical issues
- Find our passion and try to influence the need for changes by taking a stand and taking responsibility for changes

Connections and Collaboration

- Transition towards more interdisciplinary collaborations
- Consult more experts in each situation
- Broaden the focus to include community and public health ethics
- Expand to the government and industry level (for example, create an ethical decision-making framework for government-level decisions)
- Build relationships, increase interdisciplinary collaboration, work together to resolve conflicts in a way that sustains the interests of various groups.

- How do we know if the focus needs to be expanded when the boundaries of health ethics are so unclear to begin with? i.e. where do political, economic, legal ethics begin/ where do they overlap? Where do you draw the line between health ethics and personal ethics (what's ethical for some is not for others)
- Increase opportunities to develop solidarity among like-minded individuals that are already thinking, talking and doing something about ethical issues

Dialogue and Reflection vs. Action

- Greater communication within and between ethics committees
- Increase dialogue with politicians, community
- Step back and be reflective
- We're not sure we are asking the right questions
- We talk a lot, but now we need to act

Education

- Health ethics should be innate within us- not something we need to be educated about
- Education is critical- PHEN should increase its profile
- Make resources information easily available- for example, PHEN's Introduction to Bioethics distance education course
- Increased public education
- Provide a health ethics course for media

Everyday Ethics

- Ethics is in everything we do, so it is constantly expanding and changing
- Ethics needs to be part of everyone and everything and everywhere
- Think about how ethics affects individuals and their daily work or activity
- Apply ethics to "real-life" situations

Health Professions

- Stronger professional codes of conduct
- Take moral distress among health professionals more seriously
- More work within our organizations and committees

Population and Community Health

- Increased examination and discussion of social and economic determinants of health
- Expand focus to view health as intimately connected to politics, policy-making, economic and social factors

Additional Thoughts

- Hire a provincial ethics consultant
- Cultural issues often make the issues much more complicated
- There is too much de-humanization- we need to change focus from quantity to quality patient care, refocus on humanity, human issues, include families and patients
- Focus on the reward of the value itself rather than economic gains
- Must start with simple solutions
- Must be organized, knowledgeable about the issues and have high standards to work towards