

The 2nd Annual Postgraduate Conference in Bioethics: Why Bioethics? Our research in context?

Monday, 30 July to Tuesday, 31 July

Location: **King's College**

The Wellcome Trust 2nd Annual Postgraduate Conference in Bioethics

Why Bioethics?

Our research in context

King's College, Cambridge

This two-day conference will bring together postgraduate researchers from different disciplines, including the humanities, and the social, natural and medical sciences, to explore the bioethical foundations and implications of their research.

Building on the great success of last year's inaugural meeting at the University of Birmingham, this year we aim again to create an intensely interactive forum, in which junior and senior researchers with different areas of interest (including reproduction, mental disorders, genomics and pharmacogenetics to mention a few) can come together to discuss the way in which they engage with questions of bioethics, as they arise within their work.

Postgraduate papers will be preceded by plenary presentations, in which leading academic researchers will provide insights into their work, and, by considering the particular theoretical and methodological approaches they have drawn upon, stimulate a broad discussion of the foundations upon which bioethics research is built, the development of coherent future research agendas, and methods of engagement with policy makers, the media and the public.

- * The conference is fully funded, so there is no fee for delegates
- * Places are limited to 30 postgraduate students, of which 15 will be reserved for those giving presentations
- * Accommodation at King's College, Cambridge, and all meals, will be provided (we are unable to cover travel expenses)

Plenary Speakers:

Professor Ruth Chadwick
Professor of Bioethics and Director of CESAGen, University of Cardiff

Dr. Adam Hedgecoe
Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Sussex

Professor Martin Johnson
Professor of Reproductive Sciences, University of Cambridge

Dr. Ilina Singh

Wellcome Trust University Lecturer in Bioethics and Society, BIOS Centre, LSE

Professor Bobbie Farsides

Professor of Clinical and Biomedical Ethics, Brighton and Sussex Medical School

Postgraduate Papers:

We welcome a broad range of empirical or theoretical papers. Titles and abstracts (250 words maximum) should be submitted by the 30th April, 2007.

Please complete the registration form below, tick the box on the form to indicate that you are submitting an abstract, and state your title. Please send your completed registration form, with your abstract (on a separate word document, with title also stated) to Mikey Dunn (mcd30@cam.ac.uk).

Delegates:

Places are limited, and will be offered to those postgraduates presenting papers first. However places will be available to non-presenting delegates. Those submitting abstracts not selected for presentation will be given priority. Any remaining places will be available on a first come, first served basis. These places must be booked by the 31st May 2007.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the following people for the use of their photographic images:

* Dr Freda Miller, Developmental and Stem Cell Research, The Hospital for Sick Kids (<http://www.sickkids.ca>)

* Addenbrookes Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (<http://www.addenbrookes.org.uk/about/foundation/index.html>)

* Kim Hairston, Baltimore Sun (photograph of Dr Douglas Kerr, John Hopkins Hospital, June 21st, 2006, see <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news>)

Organising Committee:

* Mikey Dunn (Department of Psychiatry)

* Zeynep Gurtin-Broadbent (Centre for Family Research)

* Jonathan Ives (Centre for Biomedical Ethics, University of Birmingham)

* Jessica Wheeler (Department of Psychiatry)

Sponsors:

This event has been kindly supported by:

* The Wellcome Trust

* King's College Cambridge

* CRASSH (Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Science and Humanities, University of Cambridge)

Event Report

Overview

On the 30th and 31st July 2007, a postgraduate conference in bioethics was held at King's College, University of Cambridge, with the generous support of the Wellcome Trust, King's College and CRASSH. The conference aimed to build on the successes of 2006's inaugural event, held at the University of Birmingham, by drawing together a large number of postgraduate students, from a range of disciplines, to present and discuss their own research in the field of bioethics in an informal environment. In conceiving the theme of the conference, the organisers hoped that junior researchers would use this opportunity to discuss the theoretical and methodological foundations upon which their work is based, and to consider how their ideas might shape, both, 'policy', and the development of coherent future research agendas in bioethics. We also hoped to raise awareness of bioethics as a topic of interest in schools, and to encourage university applications in this area, by running a schools essay competition, under the general heading of 'Bioethics Concerns'. All essays received were of a high calibre, and the two winners, Jenny Messenger (The Nelson Thomlinson School, Year 13) and Emma Colliver (St. Paul's Girls School, Year 10), presented their essays, on immortal life and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis respectively, at the beginning of the conference. Both were excellent, and provided a high quality opening to the first day.

The meeting was a resounding success; 50 delegates attended, and we received almost twice as many abstracts from postgraduate students than the number of presentation slots available. Indeed, the whole event was significantly oversubscribed. This led to some difficult decisions in selecting papers, but meant that we were able to tightly structure the conference around its theme, leading to lively and engaging papers that prompted a great deal of interest amongst the audience. In addition to postgraduate papers, five leading academic researchers in the field of bioethics kindly agreed to speak at the conference. Their papers engaged with conceptual and disciplinary concerns at the forefront of developments in this somewhat fledgling field. These concerns directed discussion and stimulated extensive debate throughout the conference. The varied perspectives offered (grown out of philosophical, sociological, and scientific traditions) were each thoughtful, provocative, and particularly valuable in making tangible the conceptual debate. Notably, much reference was made to the responsibility vested in these senior researchers, not just as academics, but as expert 'Bioethicists', advising on various governmental, medical and scientific ethics committees. This responsibility underpins the academic grappling.

The notion of 'informed thoughtfulness' emerged as an expectation those currently fulfilling the expert 'Bioethicist' role seemed comfortably able to accept. Fulfilling this expectation, nonetheless, requires diligent consideration of meta-ethics, and on-going critical reflection of emergent evidence, approaches, and their appropriateness. This sense of responsibility likewise weighted and anchored postgraduate discussions across both days. The postgraduate delegates and speakers offered a diversity of disciplinary perspectives and approaches, with backgrounds in medicine, law, social sciences, biological sciences, and philosophy. There was a shared embracing of interdisciplinarity, as each brought a story of movement from unitary discipline, into the collaborative frameworks and new approaches demanded by their pursuit of bioethical questions. One of the plenary speakers, Professor Ruth Chadwick, closed the conference, and a number of the themes raised in this report draw on the issues that Professor Chadwick outlined in her summary.

The role of empiricism within bioethics research

A number of papers explored the uncertain relationship between social science and philosophy in carrying out a bioethical research project. Professor Chadwick outlined the concept of 'complementarity' as a means of clarifying this relationship, whilst Jonathan Ives compared the relationship between the social sciences and philosophy to a marriage, demonstrating how this marriage could become abusive if one of the two parties involved became dominant. Professor Bobbie Farsides challenged the dichotomy between social science and philosophy by outlining her personal academic journey from philosopher to empirical ethicist. In contrast, Dr Adam Hedgecoe provided a provocative paper questioning the prevailing idea that empirical ethics be considered a new discipline, or even a particularly novel approach, by drawing attention to the strong tradition of sociological research in this area, and exposing the colonising tendency of bioethics. In response, Professor Chadwick warned of the danger of drawing on disciplinary generalisations, in an attempt to avoid a polarised characterisation of 'us' vs. 'them'.

The orientation of future research agendas

A number of nebulous concepts emerged around which future research might be orientated: Mikey Dunn, Ayo Wahlberg and Sharon Kaur drew on notions of 'vulnerability' to frame their thinking, whilst Dr Ilina Singh and Katja Stoppenbrink outlined 'authenticity' as an emergent component of their work. In all cases, there was a clear need for more conceptual work in developing these ideas further. As a counterbalance to this conceptual approach, a number of speakers framed future agendas in bioethics research around 'options for action'. Papers on male pregnancy and womb transplantation (Amel Alghrani and Sheelagh McGuinness), pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (Eva Asscher), and psychopharmacological enhancement (Katja Stoppenbrink), considered how future scientific developments should focus and orientate bioethical inquiries of today.

The impact of socio-political context and regulatory frameworks

The third major theme was the impact that different socio-political contexts, and regulatory frameworks, had in mediating the application of different bioethical principles, the emergence of a bioethical concern, and the research process itself. Speakers dealt with a number of different areas: Julie Woodley outlined the impact of clinical teamworking in resolving ethical dilemmas, Eric Jensen and Rikke Schmidt Kjaergaard examined how national media can frame bioethical issues in disparate and contradictory ways, Bornwell Sikateyo and Patricia Kingori explored how bioethical principles might be applied differently in clinical and research settings in the developing world, and Professor Martin Johnson explored how legal frameworks can engage with bioethical reasoning and evidence in inconsistent ways when attempting to regulate assisted reproduction and embryology.

Conclusion

The conference covered a vast range of areas and topics, demonstrating the breadth of research currently being undertaken in the field of bioethics. Significant progress was made in thinking through the theoretical and methodological foundations of this rapidly developing field, and new avenues for inquiry were highlighted. Above all, the enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by all postgraduate delegates was obvious and, going by the conversations overheard during breaks, lunches, and dinner, new collaborations and projects were already being established. We would like to thank all presenters for giving such interesting, thought-provoking papers, our plenary speakers for giving up their valuable time to share their ideas with us, and all delegates for contributing to an enjoyable, relaxed and successful event.

Outputs

Negotiations are currently underway with the journals *Clinical Ethics* and *Bioethics* to publish a selection of papers presented at the conference. This is likely to comprise three or four post-graduate papers plus an editorial from the conference organisers. The arrangement will be similar to the special edition of *Health Care Analysis*, devoted to the 2006 conference, which is due to come out in early 2008.

Plans are already being put together for the 3rd Annual Postgraduate Conference in Bioethics to be held at the University of Manchester next year. The team is being led by Sheelagh McGuinness and Amel Alghrani, and they have provisionally outlined 'The future for bioethics and the law' as the theme for next year's event. They intend to apply to the Wellcome Trust for funding later in the year, and will be seeking additional funds from Manchester University.