

Spotlight on health and human rights

Joseph R Fitchett

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK

E-mail: Joseph.fitchett@doctors.org.uk

The community of medical ethics and law educators are commendable for their consistent endeavours to communicate with students regarding their views on subjects addressed, assessments and teaching methods. There is still, however, some division between how and what students want to learn and the reality in practice.

The 'Spotlight on: Health and Human Rights' conference, held at the Royal Society of Medicine on 31 October 2009, provided medical students and junior doctors with the opportunity to discuss the implications of human rights on health, patient rights, medical ethics and law, and their future role in health care. The conference was supported by the World Health Organization, the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene and the Institute of Medical Ethics, and over 100 delegates shared their views during an intensive one-day programme.

Speakers from a variety of backgrounds in medicine, public policy, law and academia commended the young delegates for their commitment and attending on a Saturday. Dr Peter Hall, Chair of Doctors for Human Rights in the UK, opened the conference with an introduction to health and human rights and a poignant account of his experiences in Rwanda. Subsequent sessions covered specific topics, both theoretical and practical. Dr Christoffer Van Tulleken, University College London (UCL) Centre for International Development and Health, shed light onto a human rights-based approach in humanitarian crises, building on his experience in Burma with Cyclone Nargis. Lawyer Susan Wright, Director of Medecins du Monde UK, and her inspiring lecture on undocumented migrants and access to essential health care left a resounding impression on the delegates. Dr David McCoy, also from the UCL Centre for International Development and Health, lectured on health systems and the right to health – speaking memorably of the shift observed in the NHS, where individuals are treated as consumers rather than simply as patients. Support from the Institute of Medical Ethics allowed Gunilla Backman, of the Swedish International

Development and Cooperation Agency, to contribute an insightful lecture on the value added by a human rights-based approach to health, drawing on both experience at a local level, such as in Guatemala, and with large international health organizations, such as the GAVI Alliance in Geneva.

For the afternoon session, workshops discussing case studies on maternal health, patient rights and access to essential medicines shifted the focus from keynote speakers to the delegates and culminated in a closing panel debate. Led by two speakers from Amnesty International, Naomi McAuliffe and Dr Jim Welsh, discussion focused primarily on what health-care workers can actively do, with Ms McAuliffe reiterating that 'health professionals are human rights defenders'.

Evaluation feedback stressed the need to incorporate human rights into the medical student curriculum and inspired delegates to gain a better understanding of the subject. The day was considered by many delegates to be 'inspirational', 'fascinating' and with 'a lot to absorb'. The right to health is a notion that strikes a chord with medical students and appeals to their compassionate, considerate and ethically minded side. As children growing up during the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), human rights principles and language in a world characterized by migration and globalization may provide a missing link for students in today's medical ethics and law curriculum.

Medical ethics and law education in the United Kingdom is undergoing continuous transformation. We anticipate the event to be the first of many focusing on medical ethics, law and human rights. The 'Spotlight on: Medical Ethics & Law' conference, supported by the Institute of Medical Ethics, is currently in preparation and will be held at the Royal Society of Medicine. If you are interested in contributing, or would like further information, please contact Joseph.fitchett@doctors.org.uk.

Further reading

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Joseph Fitchett is the organizer of the 'Spotlight on: Health & Human Rights' conference held on 31 October 2009 at the Royal Society of Medicine, London, supported by the World Health Organization, Royal Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene, and the Institute of Medical Ethics.

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