Human Dignity in Bioethics

At the heart of the project is a ‘change rationale’ involving the identification of ‘reinforce arguments’ that must be articulated at the levels of intellectual, public and international discourse.

Moreover, the project will foster a network of encouragement for those engaged with bioethical issues across national borders as well as to facilitate the sharing of scientific and ethical experiences in different contexts.

As part of the project, CBET will be organising with the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics and the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium a conference on human dignity in bioethics to be hosted by St Mary’s University College in September 2011. This will be an invitation only conference and will seek to gather like-minded change agents to identify areas of concern and direction where debate might influence policy.

CBET has recently been awarded funding from the Porticus Trust to develop an impact-network with the specific aim of influencing policy debates in the UK and abroad.

Activities in Brief

CBET Public Lecture

On Tuesday 10th May, 12:30-13:30, CBET was pleased to host another lecture in its public lecture series. The guest speaker was Dr Lola Oni CBET, Professional Services Director, Brent Sickle Cell & Thalassaemia Centre, London who spoke on ‘The Ethics of Minority Medical Conditions: The Case of Sickle Cell Anaemia.’ Previously, Dr Oni was a member of the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority, HFEA and is an eminent authority in the field of sickle cell anaemia. Among Dr Oni’s publications is “Care and Management of Your Child with Sickle Cell Disease – A Parents Guide”, 1997, 2nd edition 2007. This publication has been adopted as the national health promotion material distributed with all patients of newborn babies diagnosed with sickle cell disease in England. The third edition is due for print in 2011. An audio recording of the lecture will be available on the CBET web pages very shortly – www.smuc.ac.uk/cbet/publications-and-talks.html

CBET resident staff

Addtional staff

Dr Wendy Hiscox
Lecturer in Medical Law
Tel: +44 (0)20 8240 4250
Email: w_hiscox@yahoo.co.uk

Prof. Rodney Taylor
Visiting Professor
Tel: +44 (0)20 8240 4250
Email: taylorr@smuc.ac.uk

Dr Wendy Hiscox
Lecturer in Medical Law
Tel: +44 (0)20 8240 4250
Email: w_hiscox@yahoo.co.uk

Activities in Brief

Continued ...

The Panel ensures impartiality in awarding accreditation and ISD certification, informs standards development and notifies decisions, oversees the accreditation process and advises on all issues relating to the quality agenda.

CBET staff members are currently supervising three doctoral students. Ian Berke is researching the privacy implications of biometrics, Halhong He is working on perception of risk and Blantyre Powell-Roberts is studying views of brain death especially in relation to the demands of organ transplantation.

On 14-17th February 2011 Professor Hunt helped organise and participated in a conference of NanopolMat FP7 project in Lausanne, Switzerland. He was chair of a stakeholder dialogue session on the ethical issues of development of nanomedicine and chair of a discussion group on nano-vaccines. Dr Stammers also delivered a paper on “Nanomedicine: Reflections from Healthcare Ethics.”

On 24th February 2011, Dr Stammers spoke at an Oxford Union debate where he participated as a speaker in opposition to the motion that “This House supports the unrestricted right to abortion”. The opposition won the debate by a 3-figure majority.

Dr Richard Lamerton, an important figure in the history of the hospice movement worldwide, visited CBET and generously donated his own library of books on death, dying and hospice care to CBET. CBET acknowledges his kindness with gratitude.

‘Polymere ethics’ was the subject of a poster presented by Dr Erden at a conference of NanopolMat (FP7 project) in Pozzouli, near Naples, on 2nd-4th March 2011. At the same event Prof. Hunt presented a paper on conceptual difficulties in the characterization of nanomaterials, borrowing from ideas in complexity theory.

The 16.1 edition of CBET’s new academic journal, Human Reproduction & Genetic Ethics has recently been published. CBET recently acquired the international peer review journal from Dr. Calum MacKellar (CBET advisory board member) and will be aiming to use it as an additional means through which to reclaim a sense of bioethics as a diverse and multi-disciplinary project. In providing a space to dialogue between different perspectives on biotechnology it offers the chance of finding new kinds of common ground as well as helping to continue to foster an intellectual community associated with CBET.

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Ethics in Deep Water

Energy and Future Generations

By Prof. Geoffrey Hunt

Two new terms have just entered the lexicon of unacceptable hazard: ‘Deepwater Horizon’ and ‘Fukushima’. These two technological disasters may mark a historical turning point. In 2011 the ‘global economy’ (i.e. the human race is obviously becoming desperate for energy to maintain ‘economic growth’ (i.e. unlimited consumption). These two disasters symbolize the transition to a policy of sustainable energy is moving at a painfully slow pace. There has to be agreement and action soon on all levels, from the international to the local. The situation is not to be overcome the diminishing returns of high-cost high-complexity energy technologies with a long-term human welfare-sustaining viewpoint.

BP and Deepwater Horizon

In the case of the Deepwater Horizon disaster we have BP, a world oil/energy corporation with a sales revenue in 2009 of about 150 billion pounds (roughly twice the total annual cost of the NHS), that has a long-term policy of maintaining stock market price by going to ever-greater depths in the sea with ever-bigger and more complex technology for the really big rewards, and keeping costs low by not investing in safety (L. C. Steffy, Drowning in Oil, McGraw Hill). A long series of prior BP ‘accidents’ and disasters, including the Texas City oil refinery explosion of 2005 (15 dead), as well as stock market misconduct, has resulted in numerous warnings, fines, compensation and penalties – all apparently absorbed by BP as minor costs.

The technology is certainly impressive. The Deepwater Horizon drilling rig was in the Gulf of Mexico, with a platform bigger than a football field and a drilling apparatus 20 stories above the main platform, housed 126 people.

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Our ethical vision needs to embrace:

- Long term planning for human welfare, as opposed to short term ‘economic’ gains.
- An ability to comprehend limits, including the limits of economic growth and diminishing returns on high cost high hazard technological investment i.e. spending and risking more and more to gain less and less.
- An understanding of the dual risk/welfare repercussions of not solving the energy crisis in good time; and how every delay exacerbates our position and makes catastrophic less manageable.
- A debate on what the human alternatives to untramelled consumerism, and its self-destructive values, may be.
- The capacity to identify with the whole human family, including future generations, and to grasp our intimate interdependence with all living things.
- A belief that ‘we are all in this together’;

the interdependence of all of us.

The deeper ethical meaning of both the Deepwater Horizon and Fukushima nuclear plant disasters may easily escape us as merely ‘technical mistakes’ or ‘negligence’. The crisis of the age is unique, not merely in ethical dimensions or any kind of major re-think, but will instead focus on ‘improving safety’.

Failure of ethical vision
The general features of our ethical situation as we enter the third millennium need to be brought to the forefront in our appraisal of the role of technologies.

Activities in brief
Professor Geoff Hunt spoke on ‘Ethical Aspects of Nanotechnology’ for the Joint Conference of Bishops’ Bioethics Committee and the Anscombe Institute at the School of Bishops’ Bioethics Committee and the Anscombe Institute. Following his lecture at a large conference on 10th September 2010, Prof. Hunt was invited to write for CHEManager, Europe’s leading publication for the chemical industry, on the controversial subject of labelling products to indicate that they contain nanoparticles. The article has appeared in the issue of 10th December 2010 (www.chemanager-online.com/en/topics/chemical-distribution/labelling-nano-products). Hunt has been chairing an ISO/CEI project group on the development of international guidance on the labelling of nano-products, involving stakeholders from many countries and sectors including industry, consumer bodies and NGOs. Some have seen this issue as echoing the controversy over the labelling of foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMO). Despite having achieved consensus in the project, the draft Guidance failed to get approval in time for a Computing and Philosophy Symposium, which Dr Erden is on the Organising Committee for.

Dr Yasemin J. Erden has been chairing an ISO/CEN project group on the development of international guidance on the labelling of nano-products, involving stakeholders from many countries and sectors including industry, consumer bodies and NGOs. Some have seen this issue as echoing the controversy over the labelling of foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMO). Despite having achieved consensus in the project, the draft Guidance failed to get approval in time for a Computing and Philosophy Symposium, which Dr Erden is on the Organising Committee for.

It cost half a billion dollars to build. Floating in two-mile-deep water it could still drift another 5 miles into the earth’s crust (i.e. deeper than Mount Everest is high). Unfortunately, the economic, human and environmental hazards are equally impressive. A long line of inquisitors into BP’s conduct reveals persistent failures of ethical accountability to workers, professional engineering advisers, local communities, the wider public and the environment.

Fukushima
While nuclear is seen as an answer to climate-changing fossil fuel, the serious questions about nuclear reactors’ high-severity hazards and unmanageable waste disposal are left unanswered. The real answers in developing countries are not energy sources that are not contested wholesale and urgently for reasons of failure in ethical vision. In Japan, a country with vast geothermal energy resources largely untapped, we now have the case of the Fukushima reactors. A Japanese scientific colleague of mine said in an email from Tsukuba recently, while the Fukushima reactors served near Tokyo, it is thousands of local farmers and others who now have to abandon their homes and livelihood although they never received one watt of power from the reactors.

Here again we see the ‘low frequency’ high severity mentality at work. That is, it happens it will be catastrophic, but don’t worry I won’t happen for a long time’. Does this not put the lives of future generations at a lower value than those of today? The reactors, brazenly facing the direction of a very well-known tsunami hazard, were protected by a sea wall designed to hold back a 19-foot wave. It was hit instead by a 400-foot (supposedly a low-frequency) wave, wiping out the reactors’ vital cooling systems. Meanwhile, the disruption to energy supplies, communications, transport and emergency services prevented assistance being brought in fast enough to prevent a catastrophe – a situation well-recognised in all disaster management manuals. It is true that the islands of Japan lie on a major fault line and there are tremblings undertaken on an almost daily basis. I unerringly experienced one myself while in a high building in Tokyo a few years ago. Yet this is a country that now has 55 reactors, with more under construction. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had already expressed concern about the capacity of Japan’s nuclear plants already in the wake of earthquakes. In an earthquake only four years ago the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant had to be closed for nearly two years. The Fukushima disaster has resulted in a number of countries re-appraising their nuclear plans. In the face of climate change the industry was looking forward to a ‘nuclear renaissance’, which is the unintended belief that the global hazard of coal-based technology can be rectified with the global hazard of nuclear technology – neither of them sustainable in the long term. The re-appraisal is unlike nothing in ethical dimensions or any kind of major re-think, but will instead focus on ‘improving safety’.

Healthcare Booklet Launched
CBET has just completed its first series of evening lectures on medical ethics and law for an audience of sixth formers and the general public. Over the course of seven Wednesday evenings during the whole of February and early March, between 35 and 55 people attended for two lectures and discussion each evening, on topics ranging from lying doctors, nursing law or an evening of the final session, when some of the students gave their own presentations, the Principal, Prof Eiser came to address the students, encourage them in pursuing a career in law or medicine and thank them for attending the course. When the new undergraduate programme in Law becomes a reality at St Mary’s we hope some of them will apply to study here. The feedback from the students has been very positive and the vast majority of those attending would recommend the course to others. CBET is already planning to repeat this event on a regular basis. There is obviously a demand out there, especially among sixth formers for courses like this that will help students to ‘have a head start’ on their CV when they apply for places at University.