

Monash-WHO Bioethics Fellowship 2008

Report for Monash University

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During my internship in the Department of Ethics, Trade, Human Rights and Health Law (ETH) at the World Health Organisation (WHO) I was assigned to the Ethics and Health Unit. My supervisors were Dr Andreas Reis and Dr Marie-Charlotte Bouésseau; they provided me with excellent opportunities to be involved in the unit's activities as well as moral support when a family emergency occurred and I thank them both wholeheartedly.

As another former intern, Danny Edwards, indicated that the ETH Unit is a great unit to be placed with. Drs Reis and Bouésseau are keen to involve interns in projects that are in line with an intern's area of interest and they both value the contributions interns make. The department provides a supportive and inclusive environment while encouraging interns to make connections with other departments as well as external organizations such as COHRED (Council on Health Research for Development) and the WMA (World Medical Association). I found the key to staying involved is being proactive and making an effort to discover what is happening within the unit, department, and organization. The Monash-WHO bioethics fellowship remains one of the most influential and important experiences of my life and I encourage all readers who are considering applying to do so.

During my time at WHO I was able to work on several important projects. One of the major highlights was accompanying Dr Bouésseau to Helsinki, Finland for the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (DoH) 2008 Helsinki Workshop to discuss updates and revisions to the DoH. It was a very engaging, productive, and eye-opening meeting. Stakeholders and interested parties from nations across the globe openly discussed potential revisions, opinions, and controversial topics. I produced a report and a de-identified transcript of comments for the ETH Unit. The report and de-identified transcript were then forwarded to the WMA.

Another very interesting, creative and informative project was producing and editing the first Ethics and Health Unit Newsletter. This was a great project to work on and provided me with a chance to see what everyone else was doing in the unit. Also, I learned a lot about the publication criteria for UN/WHO documents and house style concerns. Fortunately I was able to attend some training sessions on those topics. The newsletter had 5 main parts Public Health Ethics, Ethics of Research, Meetings and Workshops, Announcements, and Intern and Volunteer Program. Putting together the newsletter provided an excellent opportunity to highlight all the activities of the unit. It would be a wonderful endeavour to continue with should another intern be interested in this type of activity.

I participated in a number of meetings and teleconferences with UNAIDS, WHO (IVR and ETH), African AIDS Vaccine Programme (AAVP), and the WHO Research Ethics Review Committee Secretariat regarding two recently revised and updated publications: Ethical considerations in biomedical HIV prevention trials (WHO/UNAIDS) and Good participatory practice guidelines for biomedical HIV prevention trials (UNAIDS/AVAC). Two 3-day workshops were planned, a Francophone one in Senegal and an Anglophone one in South Africa, to introduce the documents and revisions, to help build local capacity, and to help support and enhance the ethical conduct of current and future vaccine and HIV-related biomedical trials. Although I was no longer an intern I was involved as the primary rapporteur for the Anglophone workshop, which took place in Durban S.A. in March 2009. It was a tremendously rewarding and humbling experience to be able to hear first hand from people who are directly involved in all aspects of biomedical research trials in Africa as well as global experts in bioethics such as Dr Ruth Macklin. While in South Africa Ms Reva Gutnik arranged for a tour of a CAPRISA (Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa) Ethekewini site in the city of Durban. Ms Gutnik, Dr Carmel Shalev, and I were graciously allowed to visit the site and undertake an informative and insightful tour of the facilities. It is clear to me that I can better appreciate the dedicated work the staff and supporters undertake each day. I am eternally grateful to Ms Gutnik and Dr Bouësseau for including me in the preparation for this meeting and the meeting itself. Also, I wish to express my thanks to all the staff at the CAPRISA site for taking the time out of their busy schedules to

be gracious hosts and to allow us a glimpse into the care and management that takes place each day at the Ethekwini site.

Another very interesting project I was involved with was developing a toolkit designed as a basic introduction to research ethics committee formation and strengthening. This project was already underway when I arrived and stemmed from a meeting that took place in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, with participants from seven African countries and facilitators from Africa, Canada, and Europe. The toolkit stems from an agreement established between PATH and the Ethics and Health Unit. This document, published in both French and English, will provide professionals with information regarding the implementation and on-going operations of human research ethics committees within countries that are developing. The target audiences for this toolkit or manual are existing human research ethics committee members and/or other professionals who want to organize and facilitate the formation of an ethics committee.

Although I submitted my abstract before heading off to Geneva, Drs Reis and Bouësseau, another intern Dr Gillian Crozier and I all attended the 9th World Congress of Bioethics held in Rijeka/Opatija, Croatia. The theme of this Congress was *The Challenge of Cross-Cultural Bioethics in the 21st Century* and it was held in conjunction with a range of satellite conferences. The presentations were excellent and the delegates were collegial and genuinely interested in forming lasting connections with other attendees. I presented my research on ethics committee review practices and found it well received, especially by a group of delegates from Mexico. Also, I was able to meet with two of my supervisors Drs Justin Oakley and Angela Ballantyne at this conference so it was a well rounded experience. As I write this report I am struck by how truly global my experience was while I was associated with WHO: Finland, South Africa, Croatia, later New Zealand when I visited a colleague I met at the conference; you just never know what opportunities are out there so be proactive and seek them out at every turn.

There are opportunities for short mini-projects as well. For instance, Dr Reis was kind enough to include me in the discussion on the important issue of language and ethical considerations surrounding the “Policy Statement on HIV Testing and Counseling in Prisons and Other Closed Settings.” I prepared a brief outline of considerations for a meeting with Drs Donna Higgins and Annette Verster from the Department of HIV/AIDS from relevant ethics/normative document literature. This area of work is incredibly challenging both ethically and culturally and I was pleased to be included in the discussion. The policy work done thus far demonstrates a clear concern for patients that are incarcerated and the desire to ensure that ethical principles and a patient's right to make autonomous decisions about their healthcare are upheld.

Additionally, I was asked to review and provide comments on the draft document titled “HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY DIMENSIONS IN HEALTH SECTOR PLANS AND POLICIES AN ANALYTIC TOOL.” This opportunity came because I had expressed an interest in gender issues to someone outside the Ethics and Health Unit but within our department. I was very pleased to be invited to give comments on this draft as gender equity is a keen interest of mine.

In addition to the above I was able to attend a series of lectures, training sessions, and presentations that really enriched my WHO experience. For instance, attending the side event at the 9th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva titled 'Ensuring Human Rights in Drug Policy: A Panel and Discussion on Human Rights and Public Health Challenges in Policies Relating to Drug Control,' which highlighted human rights issues relating to harm reduction and drug enforcement was a great opportunity to learn about an area that I was formally unfamiliar with. I was able to be part of the group of interns who met with WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan. Director-General Chan periodically meets with small groups of interns to discuss and receive feed-back about interns' experiences with the organization. It was a great experience and we were really able to get a sense of who she is as a person and how she came into the role of DG. I attended a talk given by Kofi Annan at the UN

and I was fortunate enough to shake his hand and exchange hellos with him after his talk; he is a truly amazing speaker. I attended the talk “The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: Pushing the Boundaries of What is Possible in Public Health - Perspectives and Challenges to the Global Community” at CERN presented by Dr Julie Jacobson Senior Programme Officer from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. After the presentation she and I discussed some ideas surrounding some work that the Gates Foundation is undertaking and she gave me her card and asked me to contact her. I write this not to *impress* but rather to *impress upon* readers that there are countless opportunities waiting to be discovered. So remember, if you are fortunate enough to be selected as a Monash-WHO bioethics fellow being proactive and engaging with people are skills that will open doors and lead to opportunities that would otherwise go unnoticed.

In closing, I would like to thank Monash University for encouraging their students to look outside the classroom for diverse experiences and for providing financial assistance for programs like the Monash-WHO bioethics fellowship. I would like to thank my supervisors Drs Oakley and Ballantyne for their unending support and encouragement. Also, I would like to thank Drs Reis and Bouësseau, Ms Edith Ndam, and Mrs Francine Donneau-Renard for their support and understanding when I had to fly home unexpectedly due to a death in the family. Their kind words and support helped tremendously, especially when I returned to Geneva and was once again away from close family and friends. I would also like to thank Ms Reva Gutnick, Ms Sandra Realpe, and Dr Gillian Crozier for their encouragement, inclusion, ongoing friendship, and support.