

ETHICS, HUMAN RIGHTS AND MEDICAL LAW CONFERENCE: REPORT AND LESSONS LEARNT

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The Ethics, Human Rights and Medical Law Conference was held at the Gallagher Conference Centre in Midrand, South Africa, on 9 June 2017. The conference was organised by Informa Life Sciences Exhibitions. The conference registration fees will be donated to the charity Just Footprints Foundation. The main theme of the conference was the promotion of transparency in African healthcare with a focus on maternal and child health, reproductive and public health ethics, and ethical issues in African traditional medicine and end-of-life issues. The learning objectives of the conference were to avoid mismanagement by reviewing ethical considerations in operating breast milk banks, to identify the implications of gene therapy on clinical practice, to administer responsive and effective decision-making frameworks in epidemic situations to ensure better outcome, to evade mishandling termination of pregnancy cases, to improve maternal health by reviewing new medical law, and to implement transparency in traditional medicine practice to manage patients' expectations in an environment of multi-modal therapies.

The conference was officially opened by Prof. Sylvester Chima, an associate professor and head of the Programme of Bio and Research Ethics and Medical Law at the College of Health Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

The conference consisted of four consecutive sessions. Session one focused on ethical and cross-cultural issues in public health ethics. The topics that were presented in this session were the following:

- a. The use of emerging CRISPR technology in medicine: Germline gene therapy in the era of precise genome editing, and ethics, and its implications for treatment of genetic disorders in Africa. It was presented by Prof. Peter Sykora, a professor of philosophy and director of the Centre of Bioethics, Department of Philosophy and Applied Philosophy, University of St Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovak Republic.
- b. Ubuntu as ethical decision-making framework during epidemics in Africa, presented by Dr Evason Sambala, postdoctoral research fellow at the School of Public Health, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- c. Overcoming epistemologies of ignorance: Understanding the ethics and burden of care for people living with albinism on the African continent, presented by Dr Elvis Imafidon, lecturer at the Department of Philosophy, Ambrose Alli University, Edo State, Nigeria, and JIAS writing fellow, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.
- d. Ethical, legal and cross-cultural issues surrounding abortion and termination of pregnancy: Africa and Global perspectives, presented by Prof. Sylvester Chima.

The topics that were presented in session two were under the heading of improving maternal health, and were as follows:

- a. Ethical challenges in paying mothers for their breast milk, presented by Ms Jeany Wright, the Chief Executive Officer of Milk Matters, Cape Town, South Africa.
- b. Ethical and regulatory considerations in the operation of breast milk banks, presented by Ms Stasha Jordan, Executive Director of the South African Breastmilk Reserve, Johannesburg, South Africa.

The topics that were presented in session three were under the subheading of ethics and transparency in traditional medical practice. The first presenter in this session was Prof. Exnevia Gomo, South African Research Chair of Indigenous Healthcare Systems, College of Health Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. He talked about the importance of transparency in traditional medicine and the development of codes of ethics for traditional medical practice in South Africa, and the progression of the evaluation of the quality of life in patients with neuropsychiatric aspects of HIV diseases in Zimbabwe. Then Dr Elias Konyana, lecturer at the Great Zimbabwe

University, talked about ethical quandaries in spiritual healing and herbal medicine, analysing the morality of traditional medicine practice in Africa.

Session four, which was the last session of the conference, focused on end-of-life issues. The first presenter in this session was Prof. William Landman, Executive Director at the Ethics Institute of South Africa, and professor of Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, who talked about legal and ethical considerations of assisted suicide and euthanasia in South Africa. Lastly for this session, an open discussion and questions-and-answers forum on euthanasia and physician assisted suicide in South Africa followed. The moderator for this discussion was Prof. Chima, and the panellists were Dr Konyana and Prof. Landman.

Lessons learnt from the Ethics, Human Rights and Medical Law Conference were that people from different expertise provided us with information that can be used to manage ethical problems that we experience in our healthcare systems in different multi-disciplinary teams. This information will enable us to look beyond the problem itself by considering genes and culture when dealing with all the problems experienced by our communities in Africa at large. It will also enable us to offer care and to consider legal and ethical issues among cross-cultural issues, including the chances of exploring traditional medical practice in Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this conference report would like to thank the management and staff of the School of Nursing Sciences at the Mafikeng Campus of the North-West University for providing them the opportunity to attend the conference. More information about the conference can be obtained from <https://www.africahealthexhibition.com/>.