Collaborative Workshop: “Ethical Challenges in Biobanking for the Developing World”
March 9-10, 2016

In collaboration with the University of Copenhagen, CBEC organised a two day workshop at SIUT, Karachi. This workshop was the first of its kind in Pakistan addressing emerging ethical issues in biobanking in the country in particular and the developing world in general. The workshop also served as a first “mapping” exercise as it enabled the identification of stakeholders from across the country. These included scientists, research institutions and policy makers who found the workshop useful while also making the event relevant through their participation. The workshop also resulted in the identification of biobanks currently operating in the country.

Participants in the workshop included 3 speakers from the University of Copenhagen. Speakers and participants from Pakistan included scientists who are associated with biobanking, bioethicists, national bioethics committee members and researchers who wanted to learn about this emerging field and its accompanying ethical challenges. The speakers and participants were able to raise a number of relevant ethical issues about which there was little or no general awareness even in the scientific community. The discussions were engaging with the 40 or so participants actively attending sessions on both days.

The discussions during the two days were wide ranging, often reflecting the lack of specific understanding of what biobanking entails. The format encouraged extensive debate, with each of the 8 talks over the two days coupled with 90 minutes of discussion time, a period that often seemed too short. The final session of the workshop was devoted to discussing the Guidelines for Collection, Usage, Storage, and Export of Human Biological Materials (HBM) which are under development by the National Bioethics Committee of Pakistan.

Seminars for MBE Students

The four MBE (Class of 2017) students are engaged in a discussion with course faculty Amar Jesani and Mala Ramanathan during the seminar on Public Health and Ethics in Module 2, April, 2016.

In each academic module of the MBE program at CBEC, students have seminars connected to their courses in which they get the opportunity to interact with course faculty. These seminars, exclusively for MBE students, require specific additional readings for discussion. The students find the seminars helpful in giving them deeper insight into course topics and allowing them to clarify confusing issues.
Each academic module at CBEC incorporates a humanities session to introduce students to diverse ways of approaching ethics. One reason for this emphasis on humanities is the large number of healthcare related professionals enrolled in CBEC’s academic programs: the two year Master in Bioethics (MBE) and the year long Postgraduate Diploma in Biomedical Ethics (PGD). The scientific and medical focus of their education often means a very limited exposure to the humanities. In fact, students beginning the programs sometimes express discomfort in dealing with the abstractions, contradictions and fluidity of ideas present in the arts, literature and particularly, philosophy. Despite their initial ambivalence, by the end of the year, many of them profess a long-lasting interest in the humanities and sense a blossoming of their own capacities for reflection and introspection.

This year, CBEC introduced a creative writing workshop in its Research Ethics Module, the second module in the academic year. The session began with the premise that everyone in the room hated writing. However, by the end of the three hours, the mixed group of MBE, PGD and Certificate Course students had created metaphors and used them to write poetry and narratives. The highlight of the session was a painting by Pakistani artist, Jimmy Engineer, depicting a large group of weary travelers resting in the shade of a great tree (Jimmy Engineer, The Last Burning Train 1947, 2009). Students chose a figure from the array of people depicted in the painting and wove a narrative around it, displaying creativity and imagination. As students read out their narratives and critiqued each other’s writings, some of them expressed surprise at their own hitherto unsuspected ability to create narratives and write poetry.

The workshop ended with a case writing session in which groups of students brainstormed collectively and each group came up with a case that centered round an ethical dilemma. They brought in their recently learnt narrative writing skills by creating characters, and placing them within the dilemma. Finally, the groups came together to read out their cases and listen to the general critique of their work.

An interesting role play in CBEC’s Research Ethics Module (April 18-29, 2016) involved two students taking informed consent from a female sex worker for a research project. The interview was filmed and relayed to the rest of the class in a separate location. It was followed by a general discussion in which CBEC faculty, Ms. Sualeha Sheikhani, who played the female sex worker and PGD alumnus, Dr. Asma Nasim, who played her ‘aunty,’ shared their impressions about the process. The role play highlighted the discrimination faced by people living on the fringes of society and made the audience aware of their own biases.

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A large audience attended CBEC’s Ethics and Culture Hour on April 27, 2016. The event featured the screening of the Oscar winning documentary “The girl in the river,” followed by a question and answer session.

Produced by SOC (Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy) Films, the documentary deals with honour killing in Pakistan. It narrates the case of Saba, a young Pakistani girl who was thrown into a river by her father and uncle for flouting convention and marrying a man against her family’s wishes. Left for dead, Saba miraculously escaped and her father and uncle were arrested. Using the real-life protagonists of the case, the documentary highlights the perspectives of different people involved through their recorded interviews and conversations.

In the interactive question and answer session, two members of SOC Films’ production team discussed honor killing in Pakistan, the making of the film and Saba’s ongoing quest for justice.

Armed Forces Postgraduate Medical Institute, Rawalpindi holds Symposium on “Values and Ethics in the Medical Profession” April 6, 2016

The Armed Forces Post Graduate Medical Institute (AFPGMI), the oldest such institute in the country, was established in Rawalpindi in 1953. Its degree awarding programs include a two year MSc in Advanced Medical Administration. Following a visit to CBEC-SIUT last year, the currently enrolled MSc students decided to organize a seminar on the theme “Values and Ethics in the Medical Profession” as their class project. A large audience packed the auditorium and consisted of physicians from the Army Medical Corps, Army nurses, students, and hospital administrators. The daylong seminar began with invited talks which Dr. Moazam gave a lecture on “Medicine and Ethics: Then and Now.” In the afternoon she participated in a lively, interactive panel discussion which explored the complex ethical challenges arising within clinical practice in Pakistan.