

Bioethics and You – Why should you Care?

(A Topic at the launch of the National Bioethics Committee of Jamaica)

Why should you care about Bioethics? How might it affect you?

Firstly, to answer these questions, we have to be clear in our minds as to what bioethics is. So let's look at the conceptual framework.

To start off – if we commence with “I” – the “id” – we start with issues of personal morality. What do I perceive to be wrong and right. Once we move beyond ourselves and begin interacting with other persons – matters of “ethics” then begin. Simply put – ethics is “how should I conduct myself in the presence of others?” There are ethical principles and societal rules that guide us in the answer to this question – how should I conduct myself in my interaction with others?

This leads us from the matter of ethics to bioethics – which is applied ethics – simply put – ethical contemplations applied to the term “bio” – that is – life in general, including plants, animals and man. It was the biologist Van Rensselaer Potter who proposed the term “bioethics” in 1970, to encompass a field that lay at the intersection of ethics and the biological sciences in general. Since then, the scope of bioethical debate in regards to justice in health and care for persons has been expanded in some quarters to include issues such as occupational hazards, air pollution, water quality, safe housing, food and drug safety, pest control, childhood nutrition, literacy, disaster preparedness, and other environmental factors that affect health or can cause differences in health.

Ethical contemplations, ethical issues, ethical considerations – what ought we to do in certain situations?

Is the topic now clearer? Bioethics and you – why should you care? The simple answer – you and I should care because every aspect of bioethics affects us in one way or another, since we are human beings interacting with other animals and our environment. Bioethics aims to tell us how we should conduct ourselves in these situations, and to provide us with strong reasons for doing so!

As human beings, we have bodies that are subject to health and illness – and we are all interconnected in a community of persons, where we most times require some help to overcome illness or to maintain health (for example, garbage collection, issues of the environment or environmental ethics). Ethical issues in health care, as well as ethics in conducting research to gain knowledge that would benefit us and the society – are all bioethical issues. Formulation of policies at the national level or within institutions should be done in a fair and just way – another bioethical issue – as policies by their very nature affect you and me and the quality of our lives.

Many other examples in Jamaica of why you should care about bioethics could be given, but I will only point out a few:

- Jamaicans have always been concerned about matters of fertility and infertility. The matters of assisted reproduction, fertility treatment and any destruction of left-over embryos are all bioethical issues that are frequently discussed in many countries. However, would Jamaicans wish to also discuss the ethics of transplanting ovaries – which is one of the current bioethical topics of discussion? Jamaica is one of the few Caribbean countries that currently offer fertility treatment
- Discussions about homosexuality among humans and other members of the animal kingdom, considerations of what role genetics and the environment may play, and how we should treat and interact with persons – is also a bioethical issue
- The effects of HIV stigma and discrimination on the quality of life for persons and their relatives – is also a bioethical issue
- Atmospheric pollution from the burning of sugar cane at harvesting eventually affects our health and so is a bioethical issue
- The pollution of rivers and streams affects our health and so is a bioethical issue
- How we care for animals as well as use animals in research projects is also a bioethical issue
- Matters of honesty and corruption in the Jamaican society are currently very topical, and are classified under virtue ethics – very relevant to us at this time
- Ethical care for persons both at the start and the end of life is underscored by bioethics
- The use of steroids in sports, as well as the possible effects on the health of the individuals is also a bioethical issue
- Policy formulation regarding issues such as the right to effective pain relief for the very sick and terminally ill patients, matters of euthanasia or assisting suffering patients to die peacefully, are all issues of bioethical discussion
- The right to a decent minimum of health care for all persons in Jamaica, and the effects, if any, of reduced budgetary allocation for health care on professional standards, the number of posts for health care personnel in public institutions remaining the same while the population increases, as well as the rationing of scarce medical resources – be it limited intensive care beds, limited access to kidney dialysis, or expensive medications – are all bioethical issues

Overseas, we hear of many bioethical issues, for example – genetic engineering to improve specific features or prevent certain illnesses, - and stem cell research, which seeks to provide cells that can be used to repair damaged organs and tissues, and so could potentially provide a cure for numerous illnesses where tissue damage occur – such as diabetes, heart disease, spinal cord injury and paralysis, and Alzheimer's. Do any of these issues – local or foreign – affect you, or touch the lives of any of our friends or relatives? Then bioethics is important to you.

Addressing these and other bioethical issues will involve a broad range of perspectives and considerations, including ethical theories, principles and codes, contemplations of culture, law, religious and secular traditions, personal beliefs and values, as well as social & political realities, consequences, and rational arguments. Where values, principles, and goals conflict, bioethics provides the analytical tools and methodology to guide the way forward out of ethical challenges and quandaries. And, as matters of social bioethics are increasingly being discussed in Jamaica as it emphasizes values in schools, in church, in families, and in communities, bioethical dialogue will involve all sections of the society in this process.

Therefore, why should you care about Bioethics? From the few examples I have given, you can easily see that bioethical matters are directly affecting your life right now or will in the future! We all wish a good quality of life for ourselves and our loved ones in a safe, eco-friendly and well-maintained environment, and bioethics seeks to promote discussions that will help to achieve those goals.

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