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Division of Medical Ethics
Department of Population Health

Should bioethics be done in public?:
Bioethics and the media

The Early Days 1970s

1970s Tentative Steps

- Bioethics as a formal field begins in the USA
 - Kennedy Institute at Georgetown (Washington DC) 1971
 - Hastings Center (just outside NYC) 1969
- Near major media outlets in USA

- But bioethics had relatively little to do with the media

1970s Wary of the Media

- Hastings Center (where I was an intern, a post-doc, a staff member and Associate Director 1976—1985)
- Began as a conversation among people from many fields
- No Certification as ‘experts’
- Bioethics is born as problem driven rather than addressing a set of research questions or theoretical challenges—
 - Abortion, contraception and population control, definition of death, appearance of genetic testing, psychosurgery, rationing new technologies such as dialysis, conducting research in the wake of Tuskegee revelations, genetic engineering of microorganisms

1970s Wary of the Media

- Bioethics needed to establish itself
- Academic reputability
- Attract funding
- Identify modes of work—collaborative working groups as opposed to single scholars
- Obtain recognition from medicine, science and their critics such as Szasz, Illich, Pappworth, and many others
- Media and public activity not consistent or even threatened legitimacy of new field!!

The Early Days 1980s

1980s Toes into the water!

- Willard Gaylin hosted 'Hard Choices' PBS 6 part program produced with KCTS Seattle
- The Karen Ann Quinlan case had introduced bioethicists to the public through the media
- The birth of Louise Brown in 1978 generated keen interest on the part of the media in ethics of new technology regarding reproduction and sex!
- Bioethics began to transition from religiously grounded conversation to 'philosophical' making it more acceptable and accessible to multicultural America
- Bioethics became more self assured as it began to have achievements to talk about—brain death, rules for conducting clinical research; guidelines for mass genetic screening, Asilomar as well as publications and journals and courses

1980s Toes into the water!

• AIDS

1980s Toes into the water!

- Should bioethics try to talk to the public—A question I asked myself at the Hastings Center
- If so, why—
 - An applied field so it should share findings with public
 - Should seek to empower patients
 - Should address need for help
End of life care
 - Should engage public to engage politically
 - Should test claims against reality of real world
 - Should get them thinking about ethics of new technologies
 - Transplants; artificial heart

1980s Toes into the water!

- Should bioethics try to talk to the public—A question I asked myself at the Hastings Center
- If so, why not —
 - Might damage field to be seen as popularizing—'Carl Sagan syndrome'
 - Media is interested in controversy not education
 - Media format is too brief to do ethics
 - Bioethicists do not know how to engage media nor do many but a few academics
 - Just not part of the role or task of bioethicists

1980s Toes into the water!

- These questions ignored some other important issues
- Media likes hi tech and breaking news stories—less so system problems or ongoing problems
- Rise of cable news and then Social Media
- The need to educate media about bioethics
- The political dangers of engaging the public—politicizing bioethics
- The green-eyed monster of envy

The Maturing Era 1990s

1990s Maturity!

- Bioethics goes public
- I worked with the media to educate them about the need to attend to the ethical dimensions of all biomedical stories
- Huge appetite in USA and later UK and elsewhere for bioethics stories—bioethics grabbed attention
- Shifting to control the story
- Cable news and a new opportunity—the shift to TV as newspapers started to get in trouble due to rise of TV
- Targeting your audience—radio, TV, newspapers
- Public engagement – commissions, hearings, panels, patient groups, unions, NGOs, industry

1990s Maturity!

- Challenges
- Once voice dominates the need to involve others
- The skills are necessary—not for all bioethicists
- The problem of your own institution
- Conflicts of interest
- Introduction of non-USA perspectives
 - Love of autonomy
 - Lack of National Health insurance
 - Less focus on Hi-tech

1990s Maturity!

- Challenges
- Few voices dominate
 - the need to involve others, train others
- The skills are necessary—not for all bioethicists
- The problem of your own institution
- Conflicts of interest
- Introduction of non-USA perspectives
 - Love of autonomy
 - Lack of National Health insurance
 - Less focus on Hi-tech

Where to go 2000s and beyond

Now and the future

- Social media and bioethical chatter
- Better use of social media to empower
- The absolute importance of holding bioethics accountable to the public—as it gains authority and power
- The incorporation of bioethics into health care requires coverage
- New technologies demand media attention
- Hard choice demand media attention
- Empowerment of patients, families and communities can only occur through the media