



## **CONFERENCE REPORT**

### **Ethical and legal issues pertaining to the care of older people**

Held at the Centre for Ethics and Medicine, University of Bristol 19/03/10

On Friday 19<sup>th</sup> March, the Bioethics BSc students of Bristol University held a conference on the ethical and legal care for the elderly. We thought the event to be apt given our rapidly aging population and ever-increasing need to recognise the need for a fundamental humanity in caring for older patients. We thought it appropriate to highlight the current issues surrounding care of the elderly, especially to an audience predominantly consisting of future doctors and associated healthcare professionals. The conference was set up in a fairly informal way to allow for as much participation and discussion as possible from the audience.

#### ***Dr Lindsey Dow: Practical approaches to Care of the Elderly and Stroke Management***

This was a thoroughly interesting and very interactive talk involving intimate discussion of four case studies. The use of an electronic voting system provided scope for stimulating debate on the inevitable difference in opinion within the room. It was an insightful presentation, raising our awareness of the significant ethical issues including issues like reverse ageism and the conflict of autonomy between the doctors and the next of kin surrounding incompetent patients.

#### ***Dr Liz Lloyd: Health and Social Care Policies on ageing***

The presentation was a fascinating insight into a socio-economic and political aspect of care relating to the elderly. It highlighted the partnership orientation of policy, in which the state and the individual provided a collaborative effort in supplying services in care. Dr Lloyd also discussed the social aversion from dependency stigmatisation and the need for local variation in the provision of care.

## **Dr. Rhona Knight: 2009 Nuffield report: 'Dementia: Ethical Issues'**

Dr Knight outlined some important social and clinical issues relating to dementia that have arisen during the course of her work, including the day-to-day care of someone with dementia. These highlighted the importance of having a 'case-based' approach to ethical decisions, and having a belief about the nature of, and the quality of life with, dementia. Furthermore, it was found that the interests of both the patient and their carer should be promoted, and that we should seek to include patients with dementia in society in accordance with solidarity, whilst strongly upholding respect for the personhood, identity and value of the individual with dementia.

## **Professor Ruud ter Meulen: *Autonomy in Relation to Care of Older People***

The increasing importance of such issues owing to the aging demographic of the population was reiterated, as was the significance of having a caring attitude in the realm of certain institutions that should aim to nurture older people. The 'Ethic of Care' (J. Tronto) was discussed, alongside notions of liberalism and rights. The presentation closed with an examination of the concept of autonomy in long-term care of the elderly, and some useful questions subsequently brought out valuable points in relation to the view of older people that society today holds, and how we may seek to improve their treatment.

## **All: *Discussion***

We finished with a discussion of possible improvements in the areas of clinical, social and research prospects.

### **Clinical aims:**

- the introduction of specialist nurses who may have a mediatory role in situations of conflicts of opinion;
- the increase in specialist wards for older people;
- the consideration of the appropriateness of the hospital environment.

### **Social aims:**

- raising awareness of the importance of respectful and kindly care for older people, perhaps with a campaign involving a suitable celebrity figurehead;
- increasing and improving training and resources for social and care workers;
- increasing home visits;
- promoting social support groups and voluntary organisations;
- expanding state support for care homes; raising awareness of preventative action regarding early dementia;

- ring-fencing government funds for services which support older people;
- the encouragement of social inclusion through common interests spanning all age-groups.

**Research aims:**

- understanding where to draw the line on life-prolonging treatment;
- reconciling quality and quantity of life;
- methods of increasing autonomy and decision-making capacities; the prospect of using 'life books';
- the potential therapeutic effects of a suitable and stimulating environment.

This discussion marked the close of a very informative and thought-provoking day. We would like to extend our gratitude to the Institute of Medical Ethics and the Elizabeth Williams Trust for providing us with the opportunity to hold this event. As an audience of predominantly medical students, the conference was an important way to think about some vital issues that will arise frequently during our future careers treating a society that is perpetually aging.

*Katharine Edgerley & Sarah Harman*