



World Health
Organization



MONASH University

Bioethics Fellowship

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Motivated by an interest in understanding how ethics is operationalised in the United Nations system, I applied for the Monash-WHO Bioethics Fellowship in early November 2015. I received notice that my application had been successful just over a month later, and that the timing of my internship would be between me and the WHO. After corresponding with the team at the Global Health Ethics Unit, my 12-week internship was planned to run from the start April through to late-June 2016, just prior to the rush of interns from the US and Europe which occurs at the start of the northern summer.

Like most large bureaucracies, the WHO structure is a perpetual work in progress. At the time of my internship, the ethics team sat in the Global Health Ethics (GHE) Unit, within the Department of Information, Evidence and Research (IER), itself within the Health Systems Innovation Cluster (HIS) – that is, WHO/HQ/HSI/IER/GHE. The team itself is small, comprising Dr Abha Saxena, the unit Coordinator; technical officers Dr Andreas Reis and Marisol Guraiib; and Agnes Muriel providing secretarial support. Formally, Andreas was my internship supervisor. In practice, I was involved with the whole team in relation to different tasks, and all were kind and helpful. Their assistance was supplemented by the WHO Intern Board, whose social events and camaraderie are an essential part of the intern experience.

Work at Global Health Ethics

Some interns come to WHO having been selected for or assigned to a specific project. Monash-WHO Fellowship interns are selected through an ongoing, regular programme, and there is no guarantee there will be a live project at the time of their engagement. This was the case with my time at WHO, having arrived towards the end of a couple of large projects. However, this interval also coincided with a number of conferences led by or involving GHE, and the WHO's IRB, the Ethics Review Committee (ERC), continued its regular programme of meetings. Additionally, there were a number of ad hoc tasks with which I was able to be involved.

Meetings and conferences

The UN Inter-Agency Committee on Bioethics (UNIACB) met in Geneva at the Château de Penthes, nearby to WHO Headquarters, in early May. The UNIACB consists of agencies with an interest in bioethics from across the UN family, as well as partner organisations invited on an ad hoc basis, such as the World Medical Association, Council of Europe and European Commission. Amongst other things, the UNIACB considered the issue of how best to build understanding and bioethics capacity in nation states, which was an ongoing theme of much GHE's work throughout my time as an intern. I contributed a draft of the WHO report to this committee, and prepared a draft report of the meeting.

GHE works closely with the Global Network of Collaborating Centres for Bioethics, of which Monash University is a member. During my time at WHO, I was able to participate in teleconferences of the Network and familiarise myself with the activities of Network members. I also had the opportunity to attend the Network's annual meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland – at which Monash University's own Professor Michael Selgelid was elected Chair – and to hear about the emerging priorities of some of the world's leading bioethics centres. The AGM was held alongside meetings for the final stages of development of new guidance to Member States on public health surveillance, and it was stimulating to be present at the pointy end of these discussions.



From top: in front of the Palais des Nations, Geneva; WHO Executive Board Room on World Health Day; WHO Headquarters building; bare trees line Geneva's streets at the end of winter

Research ethics

At the time of my internship, Marisol Guabiib was the GHE staffer responsible for administering the ERC. Not only is Marisol exceedingly competent, she was also generous with time and support. The ERC is composed of staff from across WHO, and supplemented by some external expertise when required, and is tasked with reviewing and approving all research involving humans supported or funded by WHO. ERC's mandate is therefore very broad.

I was fortunate to participate in a number of meetings of the Committee during my time at WHO in an administrative support as well as advisory role, including preparing briefs on specific issues arising from research proposals. These meetings brought me into contact with the types of research ethics issues that had fascinated me through my Master's, but which I would have been unlikely to encounter in a domestic setting. For this reason, participating in the ERC was one of the highlights of my time at WHO.

Ad hoc tasks

GHE provides ethics service across the breadth of WHO, and receives any number of requests for assistance and has any number of reporting responsibilities. In my time with GHE, I undertook a range of ad hoc tasks such as: preparing for and promoting public health ethics workshops; putting together a presentation on ethics at WHO for use by staff in Member States; drafting concept notes and funding proposals for Global Summit of National Ethics Committees and capacity-building activities; and providing feedback on ethical aspects of guidelines received from other sections of WHO, such as the Daily iron supplementation in infants and children guideline.

Extramural opportunities

Geneva and surrounds is not only the base for WHO, but also for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), World Medical Association (WMA), Council for International Organization of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) and a number of academic institutions. Interesting talks on a range of topics, including bioethics, are frequent and often free. I was fortunate to attend a number of workshops at the Fondation Brocher, located a local bus ride outside of Geneva, on the topics of 3D bioprinting and conscientious objection in healthcare. Registration for these workshops can be expensive, but I found organising academics to be most understanding of the financial circumstances of a Geneva-based intern if you simply ask.

While planning my fellowship, I became aware that the International Association of Bioethics biannual conference was to take place in Edinburgh, Scotland. I had assumed that the overlap of my internship and the conference would preclude me from attending IAB, but as it turned out both Andreas and Abha were attending and suggested I could also make my (own) way to Edinburgh. I was pleased to be able to attend IAB 2016 and some of the WHO side-events, such as the Global Network of Collaborating Centres meeting and public health surveillance discussions.

Summary

GHE is situated at the heart of international debates on bioethics, and has an important role coordinating expertise and standardising international practice in public health. The fellowship introduced me not only to the work of the WHO but also to a number of remarkable people including fellow interns, colleagues working at WHO and partner organisations, and leaders in academia. The fellowship allowed me a unique insight into the world of global public health ethics, and I would recommend the experience to anyone considering pursuing a career in this field.

August 2016

From top: visiting Annecy, France, just over the border; spring blossom in Geneva; spätzle and sauerkraut in the WHO cafeteria; exhibition of political cartoons along the promenade of Lake Geneva.

