

Monash-WHO Bioethics Fellowship 2014-2015

Report for Monash University

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My eight-week Fellowship lasted from mid-January to early March, 2015. For the first seven weeks, I worked at WHO headquarters in Geneva in the Global Health Ethics Unit. I spent the last week of the Fellowship at the University of Zurich in the Institute of Biomedical Ethics and History of Medicine.

Two primary projects I contributed towards during my time at WHO were on updating ethical guidance on tuberculosis prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and care, and on producing short guidance documents on ethical issues raised by the 2014/15 Ebola crisis. In Zurich, I was given the opportunity to attend symposia on bioethical topics, though unfortunately was unable to participate fully due to ill health.

The Global Health Ethics Unit's workload for the first five weeks of my seven-week stay was unusually high due to senior staff travelling to West Africa and the absence of administrative support staff within the Unit. During this time, I must admit, I felt a bit lost. Focus was put on preparing for workshops which staff were attending and I was occasionally left without clear duties. For this reason, I would suggest that future fellows attempt to organise their stay for when staff will be present for the full duration and/or define and organise a clear set of duties or projects before arriving. Despite this, the last two weeks of my stay (after the workshops) offered unique opportunities to see how ethics is thought about and conducted at WHO.

Though, something that generally surprised me at WHO was the overtly political environment in which WHO operates. While not surprising in theory (being part of the United Nations System), in practice I found this quite confronting. In the academy, the best argument wins. But in the 'real world' (as some like to call it), the best politics wins. Though, this might be slightly hyperbolic - bad arguments politicked well have less chance of being successful than good arguments politicked equally well. Also, it is not necessarily the case that any unit operating within WHO is entirely apolitical and technical or political and non-technical; most units operate somewhere in-between. An example of this might be the women's health unit, some of whose members I got to know well; while they might advocate for certain reproductive rights (e.g., abortions) or access to contraceptives on health grounds, not all UN member states may totally agree with their conclusions for political or other reasons. Accordingly, WHO sometimes needs to not only do technical work but also political work to achieve its desired health outcomes.

The Fellowship is not only an opportunity to see the inner-workings of an international organisation, it is also an opportunity to attend or observe international meetings, seminars, and events taking place in the greater Geneva area. I attended events at the Graduate Institute and German Permanent Mission on refugee rights, observed the WHO Executive Board meeting, toured the United Nations and several international organisations' offices, spent a day at the Brocher Foundation to hear about visiting researchers' bioethics projects, and attended lunch-

time seminars at WHO, including on how WHO's mandate extends to the realms of climate change and on the ethics of public-private partnerships in the health sector.

I also taught classes in introductory moral philosophy and bioethics at the Université de Genève via the Geneva Trade School - a free service which connects teachers with students, and in which students must 'pay' without money. For example, I asked students to bring a reusable water bottle or a good story (I received two water bottles and many good stories).

Tourist attractions are also aplenty in Geneva. I visited the CERN supercollider, went skiing (read 'falling') in France, tried fondue at a restaurant by the lake, and explored the magical Old Town under moonlight. I would highly recommend visiting the Red Cross and Patek Philippe Museums, and preferably in the same day - it's like seeing Singer's pond analogy in overdrive: immense suffering and need demonstrated at one museum and immense extravagance and opulence demonstrated at the other.

More than any and all of these experiences, the most rewarding part of the Fellowship by far was in meeting a hugely diverse variety of people, both in and outside of WHO. Naturally, you meet many doctors and allied health professionals, but I also met health economists, speechwriters, sociologists, lawyers, diplomats, and many other professionals.

My Monash-WHO Bioethics Fellowship has taught me a great deal about how ethics is interpreted and applied in a public health - and, indeed, global health - environment. I have had the experience of working alongside people of varying linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, and seeing first-hand how such people can work together for a common cause. This experience will certainly help guide me in my future career and studies, in which I hope to continue to collaborate with people of backgrounds and perspectives different to my own.

To make the most of this opportunity, I encourage future Fellows to go with an open mind and readiness to think about very global issues. Defining what work or projects you will complete during your time at WHO before you arrive could make a world of difference to how much you get out of your Fellowship, and so I would strongly suggest attempting to do this. Also, it is true what they say about accommodation in Geneva - start looking earlier rather than later (I stayed at the John Knox Centre, which was very affordable and close to WHO, but austere and quite basic).

As previous Fellows have noted, Andreas Reis, who supervises Fellows during their stay at WHO, is very genuine and kind. He made considerable personal efforts to make my time as productive and enjoyable as possible, and I thank him dearly for this. Nikola Biller-Andorno, Director of the Institute of Biomedical Ethics and History of Medicine at UZH, and her colleagues were also very helpful to me during my time in Zurich. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Selgelid and Justin Oakley for establishing and continuing to award this Fellowship, Tommy Fung for his assistance in processing the Fellowship reimbursements, and Monash University and WHO for their ongoing support of the program.