

Evolution of bioethics and society: an Australian perspective

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It was probably Australian scientists' success in in vitro fertilisation in the 1970's that saw the first extended public discussions in Australia that drew explicitly on bioethics. However, although debates about issues such as access to the technology, storage or donation of surplus embryos and surrogate motherhood occupied the media, official responses used traditional public policy mechanisms to address the presenting problems. Governments at both State and Federal levels adopted an approach that subsumed the bioethical issues among the social, political, legal and economic issues with which they were connected.

This has become a characteristic approach for Australian public responses to such issues. Shortly after the IVF developments were making news, the determination of death, for, among other purposes, transplantation of organs, was referred by the Federal government to the Australian Law Reform Commission for review and report. Successive issues have followed the same path. It was not until the early 1980's that there was a national body charged with providing advice on medical research ethics and there has been such a body at a national level since then.

These government approaches did not ignore bioethics. Committees of inquiry usually included people with ethical expertise. Further, in spite of these approaches, there were bioethical discussions in the private sector and in the academies. However, even there, it was not until 1980 that the first university centre for bioethics was established and it was not until 1991 that a national bioethics association was formed.

Accordingly, it is difficult to discern any impact of bioethics on the evolution of Australian society, at least any time before the last decade of the last century. Speculation as to why this is so include the historical facts of the penal colony origins and a century of colonial rule before federation in only 1901. Australian society is thus, in world terms, very young and lacks the depth of history on which to draw for sources of ethical and bioethical consideration.

Contributing to this is a historical secularity. The nation has never had an established church and religion has always been celebrated in great variety. The strengths of the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions were apparent in the 1970's and 1980's debates over IVF and death and dying. However, those views tended to be dogmatic as both religions lacked the development, depth and support that the establishment of faculties of theology provided in the older societies of Europe and North America. The absence of theology faculties was related to the absence of private universities until very recent decades of the twentieth century – a further contrast with those older societies. Medical ethics was also barely reflected in medical school curricula until those same very recent decades.

One area where there has been some sustained and relatively early attention to bioethics issues has been that of medical research. Australia's earliest guidelines on medical research ethics were published in 1964 and these have been revised periodically and extended to comprehend all research involving humans since the mid 1980's.

However, in a different perspective, there have been, in Australia, societies far older than even those of modern Europe and North America. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as the first nations of Australia, trace their origins in thousands of years, not mere centuries. In the last two decades, recognition of the significance of their cultures and the importance of respecting them in all arenas of life, including research, have made important contributions to bioethics in the arena of research ethics.

Bioethics is now recognised in the establishment of national associations, teaching of

ethics in medical school curriculum, the operations of human research ethics committees as well as the characteristic public policy processes, so that its evolution can be estimated. In the last two decades of activity, both in public policy and in the academy, that evolution has been strongly influenced by ideas and discourse from the United States, despite the significant differences in the religious and political origins of both nations. This seems likely to continue, reflecting the strong influence, in Australia, of American culture generally. Two other strands can be identified. A clear feminist voice has emerged in the last decade, one that draws on scholarship elsewhere but has made distinct contributions. The other flows from the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' values and ethics which may signal another direction for the future evolution of bioethics in Australia. The unique history of these civilisations gives status to their claim for recognition in a challenge that reflects, in ethics and bioethics, the profound social and political challenges of reconciliation. This may in turn promote a parallel process of recognition of the values and ethics of the many cultures and populations who have immigrated to Australia and now constitute its multi-cultural society. The evolution of bioethics may thus be marked in the extent to which reconciliation with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander populations and inclusion of immigrant culture moves beyond tolerance to open and ready engagement that is of mutual benefit and leads to new levels of national maturity.

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References:

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