The role of bioethics in public policy-making on new biotechnologies

Zuzana Deans, James Yeates, Ruud ter Meulen

epoch*

Ethics in public policy making – the case of human enhancement
Outline of presentation

• The EPOCH project
• Summary of different models of bioethics committees in Europe
• The role of bioethicists on the committee
• Should the bioethicist be regarded as an ‘ethics expert’?
• Conclusions
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The epoch* project

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- Centre for Bioethics and Nanoethics, Aarhus Universitet, Denmark
- The Centre for Ethics in Medicine, University of Bristol, UK
- University of Calgary, Canada
- Institute for Technology Assessment & Systems Analysis, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany
- Univerza V Ljubljani, Slovenia
- Universiteit Maastricht, Netherlands
- Universita Degli Studi Di Padova, Italy
- University Paris Descartes, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, CERSES, France
- Centre for Biomedical Ethics, National University of Singapore, Singapore
- Swansea University, UK

Funded by the European Commission (7th framework)
The *epoch* project

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Interviews by Zuzana Deans

- Interviews carried out between June and July 2012
- 11 key figures in academic bioethics and bioethics committees:
  - 9 male; 2 female
  - 9 UK; 1 mainland Europe; 1 Asia.
  - Backgrounds: economics, law, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, policy advising, political sciences, sociology and theology.
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Bioethics committees in Europe

• A variety of levels of public engagement:
  • a source of information and education (e.g. Spanish Bioethics Committee and Swiss National Advisory Commission on Biomedical Ethics)
  • Public consultations (e.g. German Ethics Council and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics)

Bioethics committees in Europe

- Some committees take a neutral stance, some make recommendations.\(^2\)
- Agreement models in committees:
  - Consensus
  - Voting
  - Majority view with dissenting voices
  - Agreement on ‘sense of the meeting’
  - Polder model

Bioethics committees in Europe

National bioethics committees “bridge between academia and policy environments” (Int 6)

“The goals of national and international ethics committees include identifying important ethical issues, facilitating ethical debates in their countries by providing relevant background material and advancing sound (tenable and relevant) reasons for recommendations on what to do and what to avoid in difficult and complex issues.”

“[A bioethics committee] supports the democratic process in two ways. One is better quality decision making within policy. And the other is to support this activity …with a wider public, so that we make it visible.”

(Int 8)
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The role of bioethicists on the committee

• To raise possible objections:

“[M]y job [on this particular committee] seems to be to say, “But, but...” ... [As] Socrates described it: ...a gadfly in the body politic.”

(Int 4)
The role of bioethicists on the committee

- Qualities and skills of bioethicists on national committees (from interviews):
  - ability to listen;
  - willingness to learn;
  - willingness to adjust one’s values;
  - trustworthiness;
  - ability to find common ground;
  - skills in accessible writing;
  - aptitude for identifying practical outcomes;
• ability to map key principles;
• clear thinking;
• skills in drawing out implications for analogous settled cases;
• being non-extreme and without a set agenda;
• experience of working with a range of professionals;
• an openness and willingness to work with others with divergent ideas.
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An expert is someone whose competencies, skills and knowledge in a particular area surpass those of a layperson. An expert is an authority on their subject. Laypersons can defer their judgement to that person to some extent.
Ethics expertise

- **Normative ethics expert:**
  is in a better position than the lay person in knowing the morally correct course of action. *In authority.*

- **Descriptive ethics expert:**
  has the most advanced knowledge in the field. *An authority*
“I know a lot about everything that has been written and thought in bioethics. (Laughs) In that sense [I’m] an expert”
(Int 2)
“[C]ommon sense doesn’t run very far when you’re dealing with very new technologies. I know how to get going on this quicker. And ... I have some sense of where the problems are likely to blow up, and what the limits on what we are able to say are going to look like, where somebody less experienced or more naïve or dewy-eyed might think, ‘Way-hey, off we go, we will now know the truth about cloning.’ But I think about my personal life, and I think that there are lots of areas of common, ... human experience where I’m just as likely to get it wildly wrong in practise as anybody else.”

(Int 6)
“Sometimes … they prefer to have a philosopher who doesn’t know anything about – who’s not known for a view on a topic. Because if you’ve got someone who is known for a view, then if the committee came out with that view they’d say, ‘Well they would, wouldn’t they?’”

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“[As bioethicists] we’re consulted because we are quite good at feeding into the policy making process some useful ideas… We’re contributors…. We’re part of the technical back-up.”

(Int 6)
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