

Foreword

In December 2000, the Singapore Government established the Bioethics Advisory Committee (BAC). The BAC had the wide remit of investigating and recommending on the ethical, legal, and social issues surrounding the field of biomedical sciences research in Singapore. In the subsequent decade, the Committee investigated a number of pressing matters, starting with the sometimes vexed issue of stem cell research, and its recommendations have been the basis for securing the ethical foundations of burgeoning biomedical research in Singapore.

While the immediate work of the BAC was to recommend an ethical governance framework to regulate this development, this could not be done without an in-depth consideration of issues in a wider context. This book is the product of these considerations. It tries to put the work of the BAC into a broader cultural, social, and ethical context. It is not just a celebratory account of ten years of work, nor is it entirely retrospective in focus, nor is it about Singapore alone. Some chapters are relatively local in their context, but others are strongly international. Almost all of the authors have direct experience in the work of the BAC, and their chapters provide an in-depth account of aspects of their expertise that have impacted the BAC and helped to set it in perspective.

It is worth reiterating that the BAC remit refers to “ethical, legal, and social issues”. The first three chapters address such issues from three very different perspectives. In the first two chapters, the respective authors have conducted extensive interviews with BAC members (past and present) and with researchers and research administrators. These yield interesting reflections on the role and impact of the BAC. One clear conclusion from these chapters is that as Singapore moves forward the BAC will need to adapt its *modus*

operandi to changes in the character of society, and that changes to the consultation process will need to be a part of this. The third chapter is an unusual one in looking at the work of the BAC and how it engages the public from the perspective of working journalists.

These first three chapters all highlight aspects of the BAC that reflect its Asian character, which shows in its style and non-confrontational approach. The fourth chapter offers an explicit philosophical discussion of Confucian ethics, and what it means for the biomedical framework in Singapore. This chapter will be of great interest to ethicists and moral philosophers keen on considering the extent to which ethical principles diverge as a function of culture and history. This and the remaining chapters in the book move increasingly into the details of specific ethical topics.

Chapter 5 by Campbell *et al.* explores the inherent tensions when the roles of researcher and clinician are combined in a single individual. Chapter 6 by Parham and Lo takes the reader to the United States, where Bernard Lo has been at the forefront of regulatory issues in stem cell research ethics. He and his co-author provide a thorough review of the field which they then helpfully link to the development of regulation in Singapore. Chapter 7 by Knoppers *et al.* also deals with genetics and stem cell research, but their focus is on international policy-making. Their review of this topic offers a comprehensive historical account of the major pre- and post-genomic era regulatory developments and they also consider the Canadian and Singapore situations in some detail.

Chapter 8 by Murray and White of the Hastings Center provides an insightful comparison of the ways in which the National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) in the United States and the BAC addressed the subject of using human biological materials in research. Established in 1996, the NBAC served as the national bioethics advisory body to the Clinton Administration until 2001. Tom Murray was a former Commissioner on the NBAC, hence his views on the subject are especially pertinent. Murray and White further propose a novel four-stage process in thinking about public engagement on bioethical issues.

Chapter 9 by Ho and Bobrow is an interesting venture into the various kinds of human-animal combinations that have been the subject of recent legislation in the UK, and are currently on the horizon in Singapore. Here,

as in other chapters, it is evident that an effort at globalising bioethics does not entail downplaying context and culture; it tends rather to highlight them. In the final chapter, Elliott takes a speculative look at possible future developments and how the BAC may react to them. He concludes that a future emphasis may have to be more explicitly on the need to consider the wider impact of research activities, in order to bring them into some kind of a sustainable balance in the long run. The four annexes at the end of the book provide general information on past and present members of the BAC, its International Panel of Experts, its reports, and key scientific and bioethics events in Singapore and abroad.

Singapore is indeed an ethical microcosm. It is also a legal and social microcosm. Running through all the chapters is a palpable sense that while we have arrived at a destination, having achieved a foundation for an agenda of biomedical research, we have also arrived at a departure point. The directions for the future are only now becoming apparent with the emergence of technologies and knowledge that can potentially transform society by transforming people.

Lim Pin
Chairman
Bioethics Advisory Committee
Singapore